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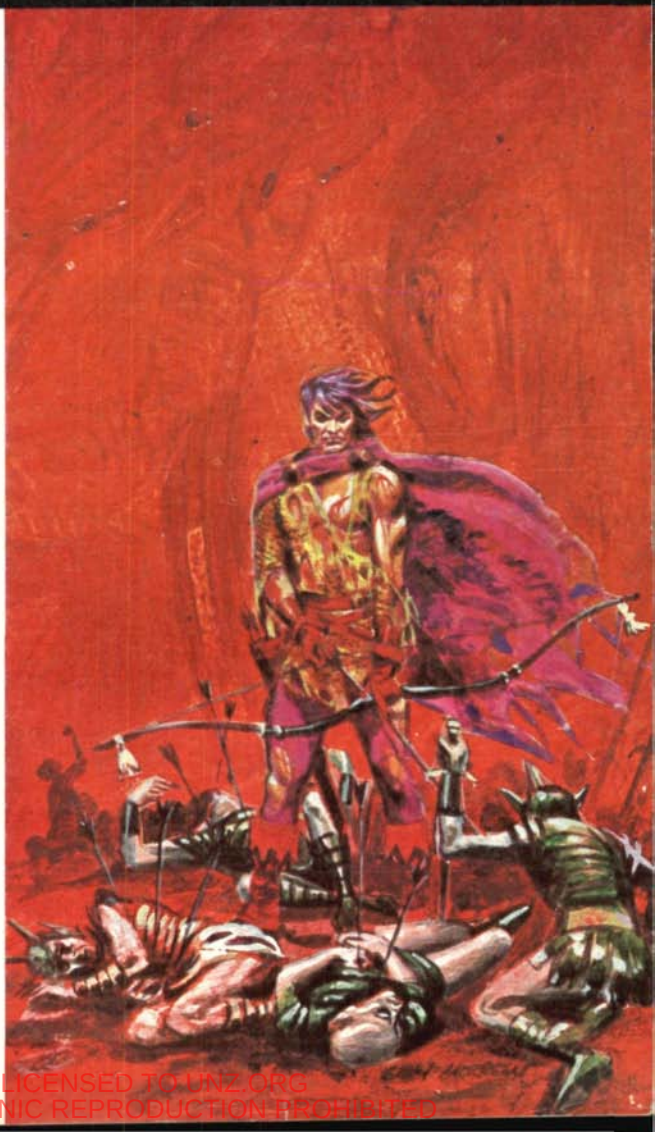

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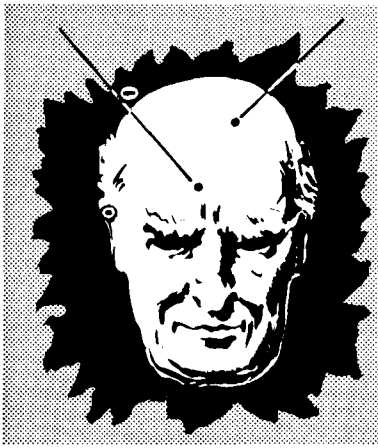

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FANTASTIC

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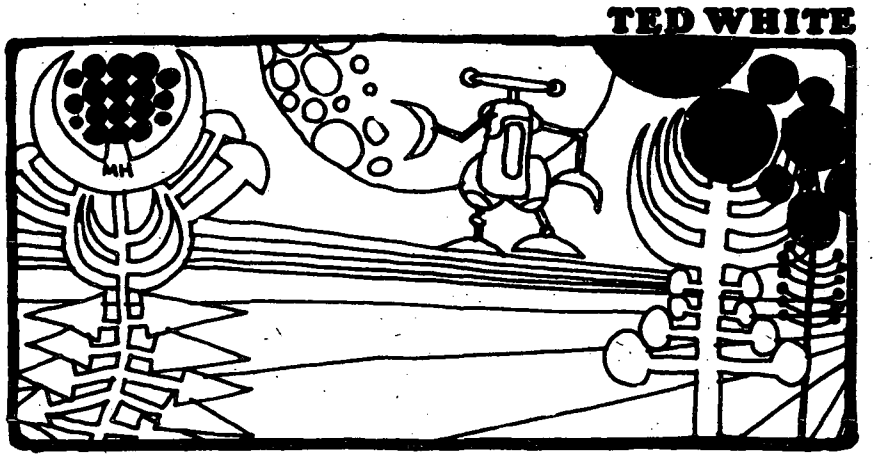

EDITORIAL

Every so often when my sense of wonder grows jaded and dull, I take another look at that which is so close at hand that I've grown to overlook it.

A month ago (as I write this) I moved myself and my family from Brooklyn to Virginia, returning to the house in which I grew up and next door to which my grandmother still lives. My "family" is one member larger now than it was when I wrote my last editorial for this magazine—our daughter, Arielle, was born on August 28th, 1970. I went into our reasons for moving and my anticipations for a return to this city in the January AMAZING—at which point I was still packing and preparing for the move. I won't bore you with the total number of boxes we packed, nor with our many and exciting adventures making the move with a newborn baby, ailing car, and ten cats (two litters of kittens), but now that the event has been accomplished and I have again taken up the life of an (almost) country squire, raking leaves, picking the evening's meal from the garden (and occasionally from about the yard—a Giant Puffball I found yesterday was delicious), and trying to get a decent night's sleep, I have found myself confronted with an almost classic piece of wonderment for the senses.

It's all too easy to regard ourselves as products of a specific time—now—and to close our minds to the change we've known and endured and the change that surely lies ahead of us. It's easy to forget and imagine that the world, in its daily trivia at least, is not so different now than it ever was. Indeed, an entire political party is devoted to the notion that whatever change has occurred should be ignored, or perhaps repealed, and if it is not the majority party in this country, it certainly has a sizeable minority of adherents. The old solutions are the best solutions, because, after all, an electric can-opener on the wall doesn't mean that anything's *really* changed . . . does it?

But they have, in large and small ways, certainly and inexorably sweeping the past away from us and forever out of our

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grasp. The process has accelerated during the unfolding of this century, and is likely to continue a relentless acceleration.

My grandmother is in her mid-eighties. She is an active woman who still drives her car (a 1950 Plymouth) to the store, rakes leaves and tends her garden. She is a pleasure to talk to, not only for what she knows and remembers, but for what she thinks.

When the Apollo 11 mission landed the first men on the moon, I telephoned her from New York and found her glued to her television set and thoroughly and delightfully excited. And it occurred to me then: *what change this woman has witnessed in her lifetime!* Born before the automobile, the airplane, the telephone, radio, television—virtually the entirety of our "modern way of life," she has seen it all come . . . even the landing of men on the moon. I envy her, for if she has also seen two of the largest wars in history and gone through a Depression that's still being talked about (more, now), she was around for some of the most exciting events in man's history—events untainted by the cynicism we now experience. She knew and enjoyed a time when man still knew boundless optimism for the future, still believed in his inate capacity to "see it through." She knew the time when science was "building a better tomorrow," and tomorrow was never in doubt.

Given my druthers—and my own rather pesimistic view of the future—I'd rather have begun my life when she began hers, and have been able to feel a certain selfish confidence that if the world were to perish in ten years it would matter to me at least relatively little.

But of course that's nonsense. I was born in the midst of that Great Depression, and my daughter has been born into its pale echo—the Inflationary Recession. She, at least, will live to see the future that lies beyond the bend—if that future will permit her to live at all.

John D. MacDonald, in one of his Travis McGee books, has a drunk wandering the floors of a hotel in Chicago lamenting about the fact that he is a prisoner of this century. Born within the 20th Century, he will surely die in the same century, never having seen the one before and very unlikely to see the next. He bemoans the fact that his generation—those born early in this century—are trapped in it, while the young will have the opportunity to become citizens of the 21st Century. It's a fine topic for a maudlin drunk (and exactly the sort of touch that distinguishes MacDonald's books from the runofthe mill), and it hammers home a simple fact: I'll be sixty-two in the year 2000, but my daughter will be only thirty. She'll have more than half her life (two thirds, perhaps) to live as a citizen of the 21st Century.

What will it be like?

Not a future envisioned by a science fiction writer, for the sake of a good story, but *the* future, the one my daughter must inherit?

Will it even be there?

In a race towards world destruction, what will be the winner? Pollution, so omnipresent even now? Plague, which is gathering its forces in every overcrowded city on the planet and in dozens of governmental laboratories in every nation? Civil disorder, leading to a breakdown of civilization? Or—that old standby, stroking its beard like a dirty old man planning his final rape, nuclear war?

Or will it be some combination of these? Might it be even more subtle? Increasingly, as population pressures increase and food demands grow more insistant, we are synthesizing, using

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 126)

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When the wolf came prowling out of the desert, it was an omen Makstarn could not ignore—in this, the long-awaited sequel to Phoenix Prime!

WOLF QUEST

TED WHITE

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

Foreword:

In 1965 I set out to write my second solo novel, *Phoenix Prime*. As with my first book, *Android Avenger*, it was based on a short story I'd previously published. *Phoenix Prime* made use of "Phoenix" (hence the book's title), a short story I'd written with Marion Zimmer Bradley (my plot and first-draft, her more polished second-draft) which saw publication in the February, 1963, AMAZING STORIES. I'd been unhappy with the resolution of the original short story; I wanted to turn the gift of unexpected and sudden psionic powers from the curse it had been in that story into the blessing I felt it could and should be—and this required a novel.

There are many faults in the construction of that novel—and hindsight reveals them all to me mercilessly—but it probably won me more fans from among its readers than anything else I've yet written. The saga of Max Quest, and his sudden journey into the elsewhen world of Qanar, where he found the adventures that matured him, gripped both my imagination and that of my readers.

Catapulted into a bleak, heat-scarred desert, Quest found himself naked—without clothes, tools, food, water or shelter. And the white heat of the sun blistered his skin almost immediately. It was a simple, yet epic task that confronted him: survival. In large part the story of his survival was

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the making of *Phoenix Prime*, for no struggle is more awesome or basic than that against the elements.

Quest escaped the desert, and ultimately Qanar. But I could not leave the world so easily. Soon after the book's publication I was commissioned by its publisher, Lancer Books, to write a sequel—the first of a projected series of sequels, in fact. That book was *The Sorceress of Qar*, and in it I brought together two of the secondary characters of the first book—both natives of Qanar—for a series of adventures against Quest's old enemies, The Others, two of whom had entered Qanar to flee him. My plan, you see, was not to continue the series with the same protagonist, book after book, because that would have meant molding Max Quest into a static character, doomed to adventure after repetitious adventure, like some comic-book super-hero. Quest's tale was told. It has no sequel. But there were many other stories in those people whom he brushed past in his epic adventures. One was that of Elron and the Sorceress. Another, inevitably, was that of Quest's son.

While still in the desert Quest had met a once-tamed wolf and escaped with it across the mountains of the east into the river-lands of the nomads. He joined a nomadic tribe there, and was with them when they were attacked and raped by raiders from the north. The wolf was killed in the battle that ensued, and Quest captured, along with many of the tribe which had befriended him. He rescued them from the stockade of the raiders' stronghold, the Fortress Rassanala, and then

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moved on to other lands and other adventures, but he did not leave his hosts among the nomads without the signal favor they'd sought of him.

He left the maiden Bajra ripe with child.

This was the blessing the Elders had prayed for: the gift from the Gods of new seed for their meagre inbred tribe. It mattered little that the tribal leaders had been slaughtered by the raiders, that their herds had been decimated, that their life was now more precarious than ever before. Max Quest had been sent among them, and he had taken the opportunity to favor them with his rich seed.

His son would surely prove a man among men, a leader of leaders. His son would surely be their salvation.

The complete novel is *Quest of the Wolf*. The first part of it appears here as "Wolf Quest." A number of factors have delayed the book's completion, among them my own gradual shift away from the kind of adventure fiction I was writing five years ago. This novella was written in 1967 before I was forced to shelve my writing in order to work full time on the 1967 World Science Fiction Convention as its co-chairman. I've re-read it and I'm surprised at its completeness and its strength. It reads better to me than most of my past work does. It is not complete in that it does not resolve the questions posed for its young protagonist, but it tells a complete story of forced maturity and manhood against a harsh and elemental backdrop.

Last year Lancer reissued both *Phoenix Prime* (74-593; 75¢) and *The Sorceress of Qar* (74-592; 75¢), and both remain in print, if you are intrigued and wish to read the stories that have gone before. But you can proceed directly into this new story with no additional preamble—and the complete novel will be published before long by Lancer as well.

—Ted White

CHAPTER ONE

MAKSTARN HAD BEEN conscious of his *difference* for as long as he could remember. He had been conscious of it because it had been drummed into him, repeatedly, by his mother, by those children who were his peers, and by the Elders. Each, of course, took a somewhat different tack.

"You, my son, are descended of the mightiest man who ever walked this land," Bajra had told him, when he had asked why he, alone of all the children, had no father. "Your father was a man greater than men. He came from nowhere, and he returned there once again. He came to father you and to rescue your people from bondage. He was a great man, and let no one speak against him."

Old Hekmight told a somewhat different story.

"A wanderer he was, and a savage man. He knew nothing of weapons, and we had to teach him to handle the crossbow. But a fighter, now—that he was!" A fire would kindle in the old man's eyes as he slipped into his memories. "A savage fighter! A great,

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hulking dark man, shorter than most, and broader. Not, perhaps, a man to sup with often, but one to stand with in a battle! A strange one, he . . . And he sired you so that we might have in you some of his own fiery spirit. You must grow tall, lad, and you must walk tall . . ."

"Toad!" Jetarn screamed at him. "Squat, ugly toad!" It did not pay to be too swift at the running games. It was not wise to show one's superiority over the other children. They had their ways of getting even.

"Toad! Toad! Toad! Black, ugly toad!" Jetarn yelled.

It was all he could do to keep from smashing his fist into that toothy, gaping mouth. He turned his back and walked away. Tears slid silently down his dusty cheeks.

He was then seven years old.

The tribe had moved across the river soon after recapturing its straggling flocks and gathering up what possessions remained at the old camp site unbroken and unstolen. The memory of Rassanala's raiders was too fresh, and it blunted their age-old fear of the ruins of Shanathor, the ancient city, across the river.

Before Makstarn had grown to a swelling in his young mother's belly, other nomads, drifting remnants of tribes caught by Rassanala's growing maw, also made their way across the river to the place not far from the ages-old ruins. By the time he was born, the tribe numbered thirty-seven.

It was a time of many new babies. Few of the women had been able to avoid the attentions of their captors, and even those who had, had found themselves moved by that primal force of nature which seemed always to work in times of disaster and war: the urge to mate, to couple, to conceive new survivors.

When Makstarn was three, the tribe had swelled in number to fifty-six.

When he was five, disease caught many of the older men, and some of the new babies, and when the tribe moved on to a new camping spot further down river, to the south of ruined Shanathor, its number was forty.

When he was seven, he was one of nine boys and six girls of roughly his own age. And he was alone, among them.

His mother was tall and slender, like all the nomads. Her hair was a rich and sun-burnished gold. She brushed it often and wore it in waist-length braids.

The older men—there were no young men—wore beards that varied from the brass of ripe grain to the white of advanced age, and rarely let their hair fall below their shoulders. They all stood proud and tall.

The other children, few older than he, were slender, willowy, supple like young reeds, their flaxen hair bright in the sunlight. Their legs were long, their hips narrow.

Makstarn could only glower at them enviously from under his dark brows. Already he stood a head shorter than his age-mates, his legs thick and stubby, his waist and hips the base of a barrel-thick chest. His hair—and it seemed to cover his body with a fur-like down—was jet-black.

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It hardly mattered that he was stronger, more agile, quicker of reflex, and the fastest runner among them. He was *different*.

Difference is no indicator of value. Makstarn knew full well that his mother considered him to be different, and that in her eyes he was the better for it. And Hekmight and the other Elders, much as they might deplore his father's savage ways and try to make him into one of their own kind, they too acknowledged that his difference was good, not bad.

But Makstarn could not live among the Elders, and his mother, he could easily sense, was prejudiced. For better or for worse, he relied upon the judgement of his peers.

He was a toad. He was dark and squat and ugly.

It was quite as simple as that.

And this is why, when he was seventeen, Makstarn needed only the flimsiest of excuses to run away.

The wolf came into the camp quite suddenly and unexpectedly. The watchdogs had made no protest, but they could hardly have been expected to, since both were sleeping downwind of the camp, near the flock.

Makstarn was sitting on a stone, staring silently into the fire, trying to forget what he had seen not an hour earlier. Across the fire from him, he knew, Rifka still sat close by Jetarn, their manner innocent, their gaze upon him challenging and impudent.

He did not look up until, a flicker of movement in the firelight alerting him, he stared startled into the red-glowing eyes of the wolf.

It sat on its haunches at the very edge of the circle of firelight, and looked at him. Its mouth dropped open, and a long red tongue lolled out. The animal yawned, its fangs sharp and white, then licked its chops and closed its mouth again.

Around its neck, Makstarn saw a narrow band.

He felt a strange pumping of blood within him, and time seemed seized and still. No one else had yet seen the beast. It was as though this creature had stepped across time and space to confront him alone.

He knew the legends of the wolf that had accompanied his father out of the desert. The wolf had fought at his father's side against the raiders, and had been slain. His carcass had still been at the campsite when the rescued nomads returned, and his mother had shown him one of its great fangs, which she had kept as a talisman. They had buried it among their own dead, she had told him.

This wolf: was he the ghost of his father's companion, an apparition come to haunt him in the night? He knew of the walking spirits who hunted peace on the land before departing for their rebirth in other places, but he had never seen one, and never expected to.

The wolf moved slowly, but without fear, into the light. It was heading directly for him.

Rifka screamed.

Makstarn laughed, a short bark that might almost have come from the wolf, which pricked up its ears and looked back and forth across the fire.

"A wild beast!" Jetarn shouted,

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leaping to his feet. "I'll kill it!"

"You won't!" Makstarn said. "He's hungry. We'll feed him." He tossed a stew bone at the wolf's feet. The wolf bent to sniff at it.

His mother jerked awake to look back and forth at each of them, her eyes blinking away sleep. "Makstarn, my son—what is this animal? Where did it come from?"

"A wolf, Mother," Makstarn said. "Did you not recognize it? You've described it to me a thousand—"

"It came straight from slaughtering our flock," Jetarn declared. He waved his empty hands bravely, but ventured no closer.

The wolf set to crunching the brittle bone between its teeth.

The scream and the shouts had attracted attention at the other fires. Several older men came into the circle of light.

"A wolf!" one cried.

"What has brought it here?" asked another.

The third pointed sternly at Makstarn. "Is this your doing, boy?"

Makstarn tossed a piece of stewed meat to the animal. "I never saw it before in my life."

"It knows him!" Rifka said, her voice thin and high pitched. "It came straight to him!"

"A wolf," Bajra mused. "It *is* a wolf, but not the one that your father had . . ."

"*Like his father* . . ." The phrase passed from mouth to mouth.

Makstarn held out his hand. Cautiously, the wolf sniffed at his fingers. Then, suddenly, his red tongue whipped out and curled over Makstarn's knuckles.

The others gasped, but Makstarn did not flinch. "He is like a dog," he said. "He wants to know me."

"Why *you*?" Jetarn asked.

"Perhaps because I am the only one among you who does not fear or hate him," Makstarn answered softly.

"Because he's *different*," Rifka hissed.

"I heard that!" Bajra said. "It's true, my son *is* different. This is the sign, the omen. My son is—"

"Mother. Stop."

The woman's face seemed to close in within itself. She lapsed into a silence that no one broke.

The wolf pushed closer to Makstarn, and looked up at him with large intelligent eyes. It seemed to know him; that was true. It seemed to sense an affinity with him. *Could* it be an omen, a sign of things to be? He reached out and grasped the wolf's collar. It was a braided leather of a sort he had never seen before. The animal stood quietly before him, as though awaiting inspection. It was a proud beast, quite unlike the mangy, lazy curs who belonged to the tribe. Makstarn felt a curious kinship for him; this was not an animal to be domesticated and put on a leash. This was a fiercely independent creature which chose to ally itself with men, not to be dominated by them.

"Well," asked Jetarn, "what are we to do with the animal? If we go on feeding him, he'll only keep hanging about, begging."

"It is not your problem," Makstarn said. "He has come to *me*."

"It is *our* problem," one of the older

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men corrected him. "You are of us, and thus he is of us, if you keep him."

"But where did he *come* from?" one of the others asked. It was Remial, a survivor of another tribe; one who bore the heavy weight of the fact that he had escaped capture only by an act of cowardice. When he spoke, it was usually in half-apologetic tones; when he was excited, as he was now, he whined.

Makstarn ran his hand over the wolf's heavy, shaggy coat. He sniffed. "By his dusty odor, I should guess he came from out of the desert."

"Everyone knows nothing lives in the desert," Jetarn said scornfully.

"Everyone knows that wolves do not live in these lands, either," Makstarn replied cooly. "And since that is true, and you have proven he did not come from out of the desert, the problem is answered."

"It is?"

"There is no wolf." He laughed again, causing the wolf to prick its ears and look searchingly up at him. "And therefore, no problem."

Rifka stood, pouting. "There is no talking to him." She turned her back.

"Wait, Rifka! Where are you going?" Jetarn asked.

Makstarn felt a cold knife turn slowly in his stomach as he awaited her reply.

"To my mother's tent," she said with a toss of her head. "And you needn't help me find the way."

To that, Makstarn smiled.

"What shall I do with you, Wolf?" Makstarn asked quietly. They were alone before the embers of the fire; his mother had retired to the tent for the night.

A cooling northern breeze fanned his skin and set the coals to glowing more brightly. There were few sounds in the empty night. The wolf lay at his feet, its tail thumping arhythmically. It looked at him with knowing eyes.

"They won't let me keep you. And besides, I don't think you want to be kept. But what is it you want? Why did you come here? And why to me? Is it because I *am* different? But what can that mean to you?"

"Perhaps it is that you are part wolf yourself," came Rifka's close-by whisper.

He looked up, startled. The girl was standing just across the dying fire. She wore a loose sleeping robe draped across her shoulders. It fell straight from her breasts, leaving her lower body veiled in shadow. Makstarn felt his heart begin pounding. His mind slipped momentarily back to the way he had seen her earlier—with Jetarn. She had worn less then . . . but not so well.

"Why have you come?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

"I must talk with you."

"Sit," he nodded. The blanket covered the dewy grass.

She crossed around the fire and sat down on the blanket, but no closer to him than necessary.

"I have to know," she said. "Are you going to tell?"

"Tell?"

"The Elders. About—me and Jetarn."

"Shouldn't I?"

Her eyes flashed, but he could not

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tell if she was angry, or holding back tears. "What do they expect?" she asked. "Why should we obey their stupid rules when they mean nothing any more?"

"It is still the rule."

"I know! No one may marry or conceive a child within the tribe," she said in bitter parody of old Hekmight's voice. "We must always seek our mates within other tribes. Everyone, that is, but you! *You're* different!"

He said nothing, holding his face wooden and impassive. It was something he'd learned long ago: not to betray emotions that might be used against him. At his feet, the wolf still thumped its tail, dog-like.

"But what good are such rules if we know no other tribes? Tell me that!"

"I did not make the rules," he said.

"No, but you alone can benefit from them. You alone are not bound by them. Your blood is new blood, they say. So we girls should make a line before your tent?"

"You haven't yet."

"We never will! Who could sleep beside one so hairy and ugly? Who could bed with such an *animal*?"

"I used to be a toad," he said tonelessly.

She gave a short, bitter laugh. "A conceited toad! You still are!"

"You are very adroit," he said.

"What?"

"You are clever. You have chosen a clever method to seal my lips and keep me from talking."

She sighed, and seemed to grow smaller.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Let me start again."

"No," he said, beginning to enjoy himself. "You're not sorry. Why should we pretend you are? Why should we pretend you've not said the things you have?"

"You want me, don't you?" she flared. "You want my body! You'll tell on Jetarn, just to have me!"

He shook his head. It felt very heavy. "Who could want you?" he asked, tasting the lies as they formed in his mouth. "Who could bear your spiteful presence? Go away, Rifka. Go away and leave me alone. Go steal into Jetarn's tent and make the sweet puppy happy. You disgust me."

She leapt to her feet, then seemed caught by an internal struggle. "You—will you—will you tell?"

"That's all you care about?"

She whirled, and suddenly the sleeping robe was in her hands, and her body was free. He stared up at her, at her youthful, slender body, golden-skinned in the light of the embers. He stared up at her and felt an impossible ache flood his body. *Rifka!* he wanted to shout. *I want you! I love you! I need you!* He said nothing.

"Can I buy your silence?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I cannot be bought. Not by you."

She flung the robe back over her shoulders, and his loins ached for the sight of her once more. "I think I shall ask Jetarn to kill you," she said over her shoulder as she moved into the night.

Two hours later, Makstarn had gathered up his most precious possessions. He had his crossbow, and his knife, a knife he had found on one of his secret visits to the ruins of the

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city. He had made a pack of provisions that might last him a week if he ate sparingly, and he had a water skin. The pack he slung over his back, the crossbow over it. The skin, full with cold spring water, he hung at his belt, balanced on the other side by his knife and the quiver of cross-bow bolts.

"Come, fellow," he called softly to the wolf. The animal rose quickly from by the ashes of the fire as though it had been waiting just this command.

Overhead, the Red Moon hung in the east. Ahead, to the west, were the mountains that rimmed the desert.

What was it Rifka had said? That perhaps he was part wolf himself? Had his father been equally so? They had both been dark; he was even covered with black curly hair like a wolf. And this wolf had come for him, out of the desert.

Out of the same desert from which had come his father.

It was time to leave this tribe, time to leave its hostile embrace. His mother—she might weep for him. But no one else would care, except perhaps for foolish old Hekmight, with his dreams of bringing new blood into the tribe. It was too late for that; the tribe neither wanted nor needed new blood.

It was time to find his own people.

With the wolf pacing eagerly at his side, he set out for the sawtooth ridge of mountains that loomed high in the west.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RED MOON cast a warm glow over the lowlands. As he strode through the wet heavy grass he smelled its pungent scent. To the north, and not far off, were the hulking dark ruins of the ancient City Shanathor. They had captured his curiosity long ago, and he had spent many secret hours among them, sometimes, as tonight, in the dusky moonlight.

Makstarn filled his chest with the night air, breathing in his freedom. The vague sounds of night insects were in his ears, and the soft *swish-pad* of the wolf at his side offered companionship. The air tasted good, and the chirping of the insects was a sound that had lulled him to sleep on many a night.

Could he truly leave it all behind? Could he desert his childhood and his home so effortlessly?

It perplexed him. He had thought of running away before, but always aimlessly, without plan or direction. He had thought vaguely of striking eastward, finding another tribe, and of being welcomed into it. He had even entertained exciting fantasies of uniting the tribes to lead them against the hated raiders. But always his thoughts were of a future, when he was older . . . *when he was a man* . . .

He glanced up. The stars had moved with him. Overhead were the glittering constellations of the Great Shepherd, with his long robe and four-starred staff; the star-swarm of his flock that cut a great milky band across two thirds the sky; and his watchdog, tail pointing to the polestar in the north. Old Hekmight had spun many tales around the campfire about the Great Shepherd, when Makstarn had been younger. The old man had woven a

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spell with his words, transporting Makstarn into lands of enchantment and excitement. It had been difficult to return to reality, and easy to beg for more stories. He wished that he could believe in them now.

West of the city, a great road cut across the land directly for the mountains. It was said that this road cleft the very mountains themselves, and led directly into the fiery inferno of the desert. And it was said, too, that his father had come out of the desert on this same road.

"What about you, Boy? Did you take the road?" he asked the wolf. The wolf only looked up at him and wagged its tail.

Another hour or two should bring them to the road. Makstarn tried to calculate the time it would take to climb it into the mountains. How much longer could he go this night? He needed rest. But he felt the camp behind him as a palpable force at his back, thrusting him onward. He wanted to be too far away to be hunted or found, come dawn.

As he grew more tired, the wonder increased in him. Was this he, himself, doing this thing? What mad thoughts had possessed him to send him *west*, into the Great Desert? Could life with the tribe truly be so intolerable?

It could.

It is the nature of memory to forget the bad, and to recall the familiar, the pleasant. Happiness, Hekmight had once said, existed only in retrospection, in the golden glow of memory. But he could remember much more than that, and quite clearly. Where was the happiness in his memories? In the insults and curses so often visited upon him by the other children?

He thought of Rifka, and of her newly flowering body. She was two years younger than he, but already she had, if not openly, achieved womanhood—while he remained a boy.

He remembered her as she had been younger. There had been a time when she had not hated him as some of the other children had. She had teased about him, but as might an adoring younger sister. She had stolen his crossbow once, he remembered—and a flush came to his face with the memory—it was the first he had made for himself. He had studied with Jarimight, and had learned to work the hard, yet springy wood until he could notch and fit together a bow of his own that was sturdy and unflawed. And Rifka had stolen it, had sneaked into his tent while he was sleeping and taken it from his side.

The next day he had been frantic, wondering who could have taken it, and what might have come of it. And then little Rifka, slender, straight little Rifka with the sad eyes, had led him to a firepit, and pointed to the charred tip of a bow.

He'd sat upon the ground and stared at that remaining piece, and he had wanted badly to cry, to rage and storm against those who tormented him, and to strike them with his fists. He'd sat upon the ground silently and he'd done nothing but stare woodenly at the ashes.

It must have frightened the girl. It had been a joke; and as a matter of fact, as she'd confessed later, one she'd heard the other boys discussing. Only they had not thought of her way to end

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the joke.

She had given him back the crossbow, whole. And she had told him she was sorry she'd made him unhappy. He'd believed her. He'd realized, from out of his own forced maturity, that she only wanted his attention. It was not in her to be truly malicious—then.

What had happened? What had changed her?

He pushed through a sparse stand of trees that sighed in the night-wind, and found the edge of the wide road. He looked back along its length. Back to the east it unwound, a black ribbon as straight as an arrow, until it disappeared in the ruins of the city.

Westward: the mountains, looming closely.

Had he come far enough? He looked up again at the moons, the stars. There were perhaps three hours left before dawn. Somehow it felt safer, easier, to travel under the cloak of night. He turned to the west along the wide, flat, featureless black road.

His thoughts returned to Rifka. How had she changed? It was true, he was often annoyed with her. He had been quite angry at her 'joke' with the bow. Perhaps he had taken her too much for granted, and had noticed her flowering into maidenhood too late . . .

The noose fell upon him from out of the night.

The leather loop whispered over his shoulders, and then tightened viciously, pinning his arms to his sides in a sudden wiry grip. He had only a moment to let out his breath in surprise; then he was yanked backward and off his feet.

There was a moment of unbalance as he lay upon his backpack, and then he tried to scramble up again, and with his left hand he made crabwise motions for his knife. But the leash that held him kept him off balance, tripping him over backwards, dragging him, tumbling him again and again against the hard abrasive surface of the road.

Finally he lay silent, panting through his open mouth, staring upwards.

Both moons were gone in the darkness that foretold dawn. Only the coldly glittering stars cast their faint light upon the land.

Something belched, a gross animal sound. Then a silhouette moved silently from the shadows close by to the side and out onto the road. A whiff of breeze brought the scent of the unwashed beast to him, and Makstarn knew without seeing its high-arched neck that the animal was a lemac.

Only raiders tamed and rode lemacs.

The noose had not loosened. Now it tugged at him again, twisting him over and jerking him to his knees. The tight leather thong cut like a sapling switch into his arms, and Makstarn clenched his teeth to keep the pain from escaping his throat.

Hauled to his feet, he faced his captor. The man sat high on his mount, hooded and covered in a dark robe. His face was hidden in shadow, only a long thin nose and a sandy beard visible. He held the end of the leather noose taut against the high cantle of his saddle.

He was a raider. Makstarn had never before seen a raider, but he had heard many tales from the older men about

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them.

"Like carnivores that prey on men," Jarimight had once said of them. "Their weapons are for use against men—not game. They carry great swords and it is their delight to ride against their foes on the foul lemacs, swinging and slashing at men on foot with their swords."

"Why do we not forge swords, then?" Makstarn had asked. "Why don't we take herds of lemacs for our own, in defense?"

Jarimight had shaken his head with a stubborn vigor. "We are honest men, Boy. We have no need for such things."

Further argument had been useless. "What good would it be for us to arm ourselves against the raiders if we took their own arms, Boy? Of what value would it be if we were to become unwashed riders of unclean beasts and no better than the raiders ourselves?"

Makstarn could only shake his own head uselessly in the frustration of being unable to answer, and unable to prove that he might be right.

"You!" The harsh voice of the raider cut through his attempts to gather his dazed wits to him again. "Who be you, boy, and where be your people?" His accent was alien—thick, as if he lingered over his words and then swallowed them.

Makstarn tried to hold himself upright. For the first time he was face to face with one of the hated ravagers of his people. *This man before him was one of those his father had fought!* The thought at once thrilled and frightened him. His father had been a man, but he . . .

An arm lashed out, and something quick and cutting whipped across Makstarn's face. A band of fire seared across his brow and left cheek, and he stumbled as he tried, helplessly, to raise his arms in defense. The noose checked his movement with a sudden jerk.

"Speak, plainsdung!" came the raider's command.

Makstarn felt tears come to his eyes, and could not be certain which angered him more—the tears or the ignonimy of his capture. "A wanderer—I'm a wanderer," he choked out. His voice broke as he added, "I have no people here."

Again the lash across his face, and this time something wet and tasting of salt, but not perspiration, found its slow trickling way to the corner of his mouth.

"A lie!" the raider pronounced. "You come to spy upon our camp, one who sneaks in the night for frightened sheep."

Makstarn shook his head dumbly. The pain confused him. His emotions rallied uncertainly. He felt his heart pounding in his chest as though he had just run a long distance, and his legs threatened to stop supporting him. Somewhere a distant, detached part of his mind berated and scolded him and wondered how he had ever come to find himself in this deadly trap. But he cried out, "The road! I was only following the road!"

The raider sneered. "Toward the mountains, the desert? Do you take me for a fool? What would a mere boy like yourself be doing on such a trek?" He laughed. "The camp you wanted, the

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camp you'll see. But you'll not see your people again!"

A command, and the lemac abruptly wheeled, tumbling Makstarn and dragging him as he scrambled for his feet again after it.

The wolf, he wondered. *Where is the wolf?*

The campsite of the raiders was not far off the road, sheltered amid a clump of upended rocks that had once served as a basin, catching and holding the silt of spring rains and now providing a flat sandy floor perhaps ten paces across.

In the center the coals of a fire still smoldered, casting little more than a ruddy glow. When the raider dismounted, leaving his lemac among five others, and led Makstarn into the camp, only one man was awake. The others were folded in their robes and asprawl on the sand against the wall of rocks.

At their sounds, the sitting raider came smoothly to his feet, facing Makstarn and his captor with a drawn blade that glowed in the dim light.

He returned his sword to its scabbard and tossed kindling upon the coals. A fire quickly sprang up.

"Well, Sameal, what have you brung me?" the man asked. His voice was almost jovial, and his eyes seemed to twinkle. Like Sameal his lower face was hidden in a thick and unruly beard.

Sameal pushed Makstarn roughly forward. "They sent us a sneak," he said.

"Eh? Who was that?"

"The herders—you know who I mean, Dannel. The cowards of the plains, so brave they sent only a boy!"

Dannel chuckled. He put a large rough hand on Makstarn's chin and lifted it, staring down into the boy's eyes. Then he took Makstarn's right shoulder and turned him around. He waited until the boy was facing him again, and then chuckled once more.

"Sameal, you're as blind as the day they whelped you. Look at the boy."

Sameal had thrown back his hood, and now joined Dannel's side. To Makstarn the sight of the man's face was a relief. Hooded it had seemed mysterious and evil. Revealed now in the snapping firelight, it was only tired and weak. Sameal's eyes sat too close to the sides of his prominent beak, and his forehead sloped only a little before meeting his low sandy brow. His hair was disordered and clung in strands that suggested it had gone long unwashed. This was no more than a man, after all. He even looked a little like old Saimight, who was known as The Feeble. But Sameal's eyes narrowed as he asked in a half-snarl, "And what is it I'm to see?"

Still chuckling, Dannel cuffed the other man, a casual swing of his hand that all but knocked Sameal from his feet. "Son of a cur, think of something more than what lies under the loin-gather for once! Observe: a packsack, for travelling. A waterskin, for travelling. And observe: dark features. Black hair, brown skin. Short, but thickly put together. Dark hair on arms and legs. A plainsboy? Hah!"

Sameal rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, but if he resented Dannel's treatment of him he did not otherwise show it. "What do you make of him, then?" he asked.

"Where'd you find him?"

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"Out on the road, heading west."

"Did you *ask* him?"

"He—he would not speak."

"That's a lie!" Makstarn said, speaking for the first time.

Both men shot him startled looks. It was almost as though a bundle of kindling wood had spoken out about the quality of the fire.

But then Dannel's gaze narrowed, and his open hand swept out.

Makstarn found himself sitting upon the ground, his head ringing from the blow, his left ear full of fractured pain. He tugged with his arms, but Sameal had secured the noose with a knot, and he could not reach up to touch his throbbing ear.

"Boys do not call The Rassanala's men liars," Dannel admonished, gently. "However—" he reached for the free end of the noose dangling in the sand and hauled Makstarn once more to his feet. "However, you may tell me your name and your purpose in these lands."

Makstarn felt the tears flowing fully down his cheeks and was ashamed. He bit against his lip and then said, "I told the other one—I am a wanderer. I was following the road west. I—I have no people."

Sameal sneered. "Do you believe him?"

"I do not disbelieve him," Dannel replied. "He is obviously a wanderer. And I have never seen people of his like in these lands before. But, so young . . .

"Boy, your name!"

My name! Makstarn thought. *It will betray me!*

"I—I am only called Boy," he said. It was only a half-lie. "I have not yet won my man-name." *Why had he said that?* Why had he thought of such a thing just then?

"I've not heard of such practices," Dannel said slowly. "But then . . . I've not laid eyes upon such as this one either. Ah, why bother? Get back to your rounds, Sameal. This is a puzzle for the Captain - when he wakes."

Makstarn caught a glimpse of Sameal throwing his hood back over his head, and then Dannel's rough hands had caught him. Dannel twisted him around, and expertly trussed his hands behind him with the free end of the noose. Makstarn felt his hands going numb within seconds. A kick from behind dropped him to his knees, and then something struck his skull and he fell on his face in the sand.

Dannel laughed, a soft, deceivingly warm sound. Makstarn tried to twist himself about, and when he had, saw the other sitting on his heels staring directly at him.

In the firelight, Dannel's eyes looked kindly. His face was broad, ruddy in the glow of the embers, and lined by the weather. His hair was a mass of thick curls that fell freely to his shoulders, a tangle that joined his full beard. Thick lips could be barely glimpsed curling in a smile.

There was something reassuring in the man. Makstarn tried to summon up his courage. "Please—what is to come of me?"

Dannel leaned closer, his face so close that Makstarn could feel the man's fetid breath on his own. "Why, now, that be up to the Captain."

"Oh."

"He'll kill you, I expect." Dannel

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leaned back again, rocking slowly on his heels, his voice low and confidential. "Maybe a little sport first, for the rest of us, and then—well, the Captain wouldn't keep you on for that sort of thing; it's not his way."

He'll kill you, I expect. The soft words cut like knives into Makstarn's shrinking gut, and a roaring grew in his ears that all but obliterated the rest of what the big man had said. *He'll kill you, I expect.* The words seemed to repeat themselves like the roar of the river rapids, over and over, running together, colliding with each other, growing into a vast, meaningless jangle of fear: *Kill expect he'll I you kill I expect he'll you kill . . . kill . . . kill . . .*

Death is never an unreal thing for those who live with it. And yet it becomes impersonal, distant, elemental—its familiarity breeds callousness. In Makstarn's childhood other children had died—some of the disease, one drowned in the river, and one, a girl whom Makstarn had always hated, impaled upon the misfired shaft of a crossbow, her blood spurting from her throat, soon to attract flies—but no one among those children who lived had grieved. These were not the first the Shephard had gathered into His flock, nor would they be the last.

Makstarn remembered the girl—Syntha had been her name, and it was still an ugly name—who had died with the shaft in her throat. One of the oldest of the children, tall for a girl, and active among the boys in competitive sports, she had so often made sport of him, her teasing strident and cruel—the more so because she was a girl and could easily take refuge in the fact. His dominant memory of her as she had been in life was that of her prancing about, her face screwed up into a taunting grimace, her golden braids flying.

One of the men—he no longer remembered who—had been instructing in target practice. A crossbow had been badly cocked, and the trigger had slipped free the thong. No one had seen it. Syntha had made no sound. One moment she had been combing wool before her tent. The next, she was collapsed over her work, the wool thick with warm, sticky blood.

A shout had gone up, and Makstarn had been one of those who had gathered to stare at the dying child. Someone had pulled her back from the wool, and now she lay loosely sprawled on her back, blood still pulsing feebly from her throat.

He had stared at her and had not been able to feel sorry for her. He was nine years old, and his single thought was: *Now she'll leave me alone.*

And then all too soon he was back at crossbow instruction, Jetarn covertly poking him in the back with a shaft, and it was as if Syntha had never been.

Only now Makstarn began to wonder if Syntha had seen the shaft. Had she known? Had she warning? How might she have felt, to know that death was a single instant away? Or had she only that sudden, shocking knowledge of a *thing* in her throat—of pain and choking and surprise?

Had she known she was dying? *Did she know she was dead?*

He felt something warm flood his upper thighs, and it was several moments before he realized what it

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was. Then he felt bitterly ashamed.

The raider was still rocking on his heels as dawn chased the stars from the greying sky.

CHAPTER THREE

HE HAD FALLEN into tormented dreams and did not wake until a kick caught him in his kidney.

The sun was white in the early morning sky, and already the low wall of rocks was catching and reflecting its heat.

"You. Up!"

Makstarn shook his head in bewilderment. His tongue was thick and fumbling in his mouth, and his body dead. There was no sensation in his arms and little in his legs. A dull ache was only beginning to spread over the small of his back from the kick.

He gazed up without comprehension at the men standing around him. They were tall blotches against the white sky. One of them moved, and water struck his face. He wanted to cry out his thanks for that blessed kindness, but only choked. Somehow he managed to catch a few drops of the vital liquid in his mouth.

His temples began to throb painfully, and then one of the men reached down and yanked him roughly to a sitting position. It was a trigger. Immediately he vomited.

No one helped him. No one moved. The men stared down at him like implacable statues, tall against the morning sun, their long shadows falling over him like cage bars.

"He's half dead," said a voice. "Cut him loose."

"Ahhh, brain 'em," said another voice. "He's no use to us like this."

"Speak for yourself," said a voice that Makstarn recognized as Sameal's. "I'll take it where I can find it."

"You had your chance," the first voice said. Makstarn stared blankly at the ground.

There was just one, very simple thing that had to be understood: *these were raiders.* These were men to whom his life was meaningless, hence worthless. Sooner or later they would kill him. They might make it a painful death or a quick one. But they would kill him.

It was not too hard to accept. Makstarn had never harbored many illusions about himself—his playmates had seen to that. And once one had experienced the initial fear of impending death it was not so very hard to face the actuality of death.

What could be worse than this, after all? Did death come all at once, or in slow degrees? Was he not already a little dead? He wanted it all to be over with; he wanted an end to it. Death did not seem unattractive.

The men were arguing. Their voices rose and fell. At some point Makstarn fell again upon his back. He felt a sharp, almost delicious pain in the back of his skull. There was a moment of bright illumination in which he thought he could understand it all—then nothing.

The white disk of the summer sun rose high in the sky, and the land grew still. Birds that had chirped and called to each other and flitted from rock to

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bush were silent now, drowsing amid the sheltered branches in the shade. Small rodents that had stolen about the campsite searching out those abandoned crumbs of food that man inevitably leaves behind him had once again disappeared. Only their tiny tracks in the sand wove here and there to record their nervous passage.

The sun beat down heavily upon the land, and small scaly creatures nestled in the cracks of the rocks while above there was only one lonely sign of movement—the wheeling of a blue-black scavenger bird, dipping and careening under the sky.

There was no wind, and the sky was clean of clouds. The trees seemed to droop, the land itself to pant in the heat.

The scavenger bird dipped lower, its instincts confused, worried. Once it swooped down in a dive, only to break its plunge and bank up again with furious pinions of its wings, the backlash of wind stirring the sand and flinging it against the thing that had moved.

The thing that had moved lay silent again, but still alive. There was a smell to it, the smell of death not yet come. But it was enough to warn off the rodents, whose hither and yon trails skirted the thing that had moved, even as it had attracted the anxious blue-black bird that still dipped and wheeled impatiently above.

The sun followed its implacable course westward, and once again the shadows grew, and the land seemed to come alive again. A breeze stirred gently, fanning over the thing that still moved, catching at the sand adhered to its skin and brushing it free. And once again it moved, making a sound of torment.

A small red beetle appeared in the sand near the thing that had moved, and began an inching course toward its shadow. The beetle followed the dips and hollows in the sand, cresting each as a raft might an ocean's waves. It detoured a small pebble, and entered the shade. Soon it was climbing the thing.

The beetle climbed over a mossy pelt of hair, too light in weight to disturb it. Then it followed a long bare patch of blotchy skin until at last it was once more on the sand. Then a bird dropped down from a nearby bush and ate it.

Finally the sun sank behind the western mountains, and twilight fell across the land. The graceful muneys came at last from their burrows to leap and play upon the turf and sand, and larger animals moved into strategic positions.

Down out of the rocks leapt a large shape. Simultaneously, there was a thud and a high-pitched squeal. There were other peeps and squeeks and in a moment's scampering the sand was empty of muneys . . . of live muneys . . .

The wolf settled down with the muney it had caught. There was a brittle sound as it broke the small animal's back. The wolf snarled to itself and worried at the furry corpse. Then, suddenly, the wolf lifted its head. The breeze had shifted. It sniffed.

Carrying the muney in its mouth, the wolf padded softly across the sand to the unmoving body of the creature it

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had once known. It dropped the muney and began sniffing and nosing about the naked figure on the sand. It circled the body completely, twice, and then settled back on its haunches to regard it, as though puzzled. A low whine broke from its throat.

For Makstarn, death was real. He knew without doubt that he had died. What he had not expected was a return to life.

He retained no conscious memories of his ordeal; only a certain buried knowledge that he would carry with him for the rest of his life. He had died, but had not remained dead. That he would always know.

His memories began with dreams, the dreams of lying in his mother's arms, a small child again. She was bathing him, gently, as she had done when he had been a baby. It was very nice.

But gradually the bathing grew harsher and he began to become dimly aware that his mother's arms were hard and cold, and that she was making strange animal noises.

When he opened his eyes he saw the wolf, looming in the scarlet light of the red moon, sitting before him. The wolf's tongue was hanging out, and its eyes gazed directly into his.

For a moment Makstarn did not comprehend. He saw a strangely benign creature with an expression of concern upon its elongated face, and he remembered his mother and wondered that this was not she.

The wolf made a low sound in its throat—not a whine, nor yet a growl, but an almost human sound: It nudged something at him with its nose.

Makstarn tried to focus his eyes at the bloody object. He caught the scent and knew that it was a dead animal, and that it had not been dead long. A long involuntary shudder passed over his body and that was when he knew that he had himself been dead.

The wolf stayed with him for the rest of the night. It ate its muney when at last it seemed to understand that Makstarn would not, and later, when both moons had set and the air had grown cool, it stretched out its length against the boy's body. In his fevered sleep, Makstarn slipped one arm around the animal and pressed himself closer to it.

For Makstarn the night was a period without duration, timeless, filled with hallucinations and nightmares, and yet, in later memory, too brief to really recall. At times sweat rolled from his body; at other times he shook with chills. Later he would look back upon that night, and the day that preceded it, and wonder if it had been one night or many. And he would marvel at his own resilience.

He woke again when the rising sun touched his eyes.

He was lying against the sleeping wolf, his face half buried in its fur. The fur had a dusty odor, but it was not unpleasant, and perhaps even reassuring.

Fragmented thoughts came to him as he lay unmoving by the wolf.

He was alive.

The wolf, stretched out, was bigger than he.

He was naked.

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He was alive.

He tried to sit up. Immediately he became dizzy, and vertigo communicated directly to his stomach. Involuntarily, he heaved, his tortured stomach empty.

He lay back again and tried to gather his memories.

He recalled his capture. It was a bitter, but curiously disassociated memory. He remembered being tied up by one of the raiders. His name . . . Dannel . . .? He remembered being told he would be killed. He did not remember anything else.

And yet— This sandy bed and the surrounding rocks. He turned his head carefully. And yes: the charred remnants of the fire, there in the sand, not even covered by a few quick kicks of a boot. Yes, this was the same place they had made their camp. But, the wolf was with him now; *where were the raiders?*

He felt there was something he ought to know that he could not remember. But trying to remember only brought pain to his head.

He twisted over onto his back and raised an arm.

Deep grooves circled his wrist and cut across his forearm. He bent his wrist. It seemed swollen about the grooves, and moved stiffly. The grooves themselves were blue-black, their edges greenish.

He tried to catalogue his body's aches and pains. It was difficult; his body felt sore and misused—the way it had when he had made the mistake of letting too many of the others gang up on him in fights when he'd been younger. For a day or two afterwards he would feel bruised all over. This was worse. His other arm and wrist were equally badly scored.

His head ached. When he put his right hand behind his head, his touch produced a sharp immediate pain, and he could feel a swelling and the crust of matted, dried blood in his hair.

The sun was warming the air. At first the heat felt good, and then it made him short of breath and nauseous. He tried sitting up again.

His arms moved clumsily, but he managed to prop himself into a sitting position, his body weakly protesting. A strong shock hit him when he looked down his body. Cuts and bruises discolored his legs and torso, and the skin was angrily blistered in long patches. He seemed to have shed a quarter of his weight. The body that he stared down at was emaciated and bony and almost totally unfamiliar.

His immediate need was shade; shade and rest. And water, he suddenly realized. He was terribly thirsty.

Carefully, he turned onto his hands and knees. The soft sand thrust up between his fingers but ground abrasively against his knees. He groaned, softly.

Immediately the wolf's ears jumped up into alertness and it rolled over onto its feet in one fluid motion.

"Hullo, Wolf," Makstarn said, tasting the words as he formed them. His voice was low and seemed to catch in his dry throat, but it resounded loudly against the rocks.

The wolf settled back onto its haunches and stared at him. He wondered what strange thoughts lay behind those gentle eyes.

But it had come back. It had

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returned to him. It did not matter why. Not yet. Not now.

With the wolf pacing slowly at his side, Makstarn crawled into a patch of morning shade where a low tree angled out over the rocks. He leaned back against the cool surface of the rock and wondered what he could do now. His breath came in short pants, and he felt very weak. The wolf yawned and curled up next to him again.

Then Makstarn fell once more into sleep.

He rested, alternately awake and dozing, for the rest of the day. It was hot, but not unbearable in the shade. His mouth was dry and his tongue fuzzy, but he found a smooth pebble and sucked on it, and that brought some relief. Mostly he dreamed, strange waking dreams in which it rained, or water bubbled up out of a nearby stream, or he found himself well and clothed again and got up and walked away—always, each time, many times, to reawaken and find himself still propped against the rock wall in the sand.

That evening he was awakened by the wolf. It was making a peculiar noise.

It had another dead muney in its mouth.

The big shaggy animal looked up at him with eyes that brimmed with intelligence. The limp muney dangled pathetically from its jaws. The wolf made its sound again, a low throaty sound that seemed almost like a choked cry—startlingly human, and with a rising inflection.

He looked at the wolf and at its dead offering, and he felt like laughing; like letting go with the hysterical laughter of one who is caught in a fever. He needed water; he could stomach no food and if he could it would not be a raw animal, uncooked and still covered with warm fur.

The wolf carefully laid its prey upon his lap. The muney was a bedraggled thing, its fur matted from the wolf's saliva, and it was still quite warm against his skin. Quite suddenly, it gave a convulsive twitch, and the wolf's paw shot out, holding it, pressing it against Makstarn's belly. Makstarn shook with nausea, and passed out.

When he awoke, the Red Moon was in the east, full in its malevolent scarlet stain. The muney still lay upon his stomach, and without thinking he reached out and touched it. It had grown cooler, but not yet stiff. He looked up. A short distance away, the wolf was gnawing at a small heap of bones. It had found more than one muney.

Makstarn felt lightheaded and desperately dry. He knew that he had lost a great deal of water the day before, and not a great deal less this day as well. He needed water.

And since he had no water, a substitute would have to do.

Carefully, deliberately, and with great difficulty, he tore open the dead muney with his teeth, and sucked at it. Its fur was musky, almost so much so that his stomach revolted at the task. But if he could not eat, he could gnaw at the small animal, tearing free bits of raw flesh, chewing the juices from them and swallowing thirstily and painfully. Finally, exhausted by the

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chore, he threw what was left to the wolf.

After that he slept again, but later in the night he came awake. This time his head was clear, and he felt a change in himself. Shakily, he climbed to his feet and stood, bracing himself against the rock wall. The wolf was gone. Carefully, supporting himself with one hand against the upright rock slabs, he made his way to a spot a little way from where he had lain. There he relieved himself. It was strangely painful, but he did not question it among all the other pain his body had endured.

When he returned to the place he had hollowed for himself in the sand, he let himself down once more. Sleep came easily now. And when he felt the furry body of the wolf against him later, he did not wake, but only moved closer to it.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN THE NEW DAY CAME, he came awake with a feeling of expectation. At first he did not understand it, but as he sat upright he sniffed the air and filled his lungs with it. The day smelled good.

The sun hung below a long purple cloudbank that stretched like a sandbar across the sky above the horizon. The air tasted clean, freshly bathed and scented with the perfume of flowers. The leaves of the twisted tree that overhung the rocks whispered to the birds that sat preening among them.

The wolf climbed sleepily to its feet and arched and stretched, paws digging in the sand. It yawned, its yellowed fangs pickets about its lolling pink tongue.

It was going to be a good day. He could feel it. He could feel within himself the changes.

The wolf too seemed aware of it. It eyed him expectantly, and then began a curious game, the point of which Makstarn could not at first understand.

The wolf began a peculiar pacing, trotting off across the sand to the opposite wall of rocks, turning to look back at him over its shoulder, then returning once more to where he sat.

Over and over, the shaggy beast would pace across to a gap in the rocks, only to stop, look back at him, tongue lolling, eyes imploring, and then return once again to hunker down at Makstarn's feet and look sadly up at him.

Puzzled, Makstarn got to his feet.

Immediately, the wolf leapt up and ran eagerly back across the sand.

Makstarn was not entirely unintelligent. He followed.

In a sheltered crevice among the rocks was a pool of water. As Makstarn pulled himself up to it, the wolf lowered its head and began lapping the water noisily. Makstarn felt a vast sense of wonder for the beast which had so completely linked its life to him, and to which he now owed his.

When the wolf had finished, he waited out of a residual fastidiousness for the pool to grow still again. And then he bent his own head over the water.

The sun was at his back. Overhead the sky had already paled to the lightest shade of blue. When at first he

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stared into the still water, he saw only his dark silhouette there. But then he saw a face. He saw a face that stared back at him with hooded eyes that seemed only dark pockets in a living skull. He saw tight features that stretched over bone, features divided diagonally by a thick black line.

He stared, transfixed, as questing fingers rose to touch . . . to trace the hardened scab that filled the channel carved across the brow, across the bridge of a nose, down over a thrusting cheekbone where it split wider, and finally to a bony jawline.

Slowly, the mouth in the water opened and closed. The face that stared back at him drew its brows together in a beginning frown, and then paled in pain.

He stared into the water for a long time. And then he bent to drink.

Later, he began exploring the area.

It was deserted, of course. The raiders and their filthy lemacs were long gone. He had known this without needing to confirm it. Had they remained anywhere nearby, he would not have been left unmolested. They had left, and they had left him for dead.

Beyond the enclosure of rocks he found the area where the lemacs had been picketed. The grass had been chewed to its roots, and here and there clods had been uprooted. Piles of dung lay about, odor almost gone, but insects still self-importantly buzzing about them. He found his loin-gather and tunic on the ground nearby. It was apparent that they had been used for some necessary but disagreeable task. They were quite unwearable.

He carried them back to the sand, where he tossed them for the moment.

He found his pack caught between two rocks where it had been thrown. Near it he found his belt. Still on the belt were both waterskin—not empty—and the sheathed knife. For these things he was grateful. The raiders, in their apparent contempt for his belongings, had left them unrifled. Only his crossbow and shafts were still missing.

After he had refreshed himself sparingly with food from the pack, he set himself to the task of cleaning his clothes. First he began scrubbing them with sand.

He worked carefully, pausing at intervals to rest himself. His body was still achingly weak. But it responded to the work, and he felt increasingly cheerful as he became absorbed in the immediate task.

He found the crossbow as he worked at cleaning the two garments with the sand. He found a full four inches of the bowstock unburned in the charred cinders of the fire. It had become buried in the sand.

He picked it up and fondled it for a moment. His eyes burned. It seemed like the final end of a cruel and pointless joke.

When the smell was gone from his clothes, he took them to the pool and washed them clean of sand. Then he hung them to dry on branches of a shrub. The sun made steam rise from them, and he returned almost hastily to his shaded nook against the rocks.

He was hot and sweating. His skin

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was one long series of painful strips protesting the direct bite of the sun. Wearily, he laid himself down to a deep nap.

The wolf awoke him with its return. The sun was over the mountains, and the air felt cooler again. Somewhere overhead a bird scolded angrily.

Squirming in the wolf's teeth was a short, thick-bodied lizard. Its tail whipped back and forth like a snake. When the wolf dropped it at Makstarn's side, it flipped itself over onto its feet and ran directly at the rock wall.

The wolf cuffed it with one paw, and then looked up at Makstarn. Its look spoke quite plainly: *Well, why don't you do something about it?*

Makstarn had never eaten a lizard, but he knew that those who had considered the creatures delicacies. Reaching for his belt, he pulled free his short, gleaming knife of ancient metal. The wolf herded the confused lizard back at him.

The task of killing the thing was both unpleasant and difficult. Its blue scaly hide was thick and tough, and seemed almost to blunt the knife's edge. And the devilish creature would not hold still! Finally, Makstarn placed his bare foot upon the lizard's back and pinned it, while he hacked its head free. And even then the tail would not stop its thrashing.

He made a fire. Once it was burning, he picked up the wooden stockpiece from his crossbow, turned it over twice in his hands for the final look and feel of it, and then consigned it to the flames. Done. He felt it quite as clearly as if a tent flap had dropped between himself and his past.

A green branch, its bark peeled, made a spit for the skinned and cleaned lizard. Its meat, lightly salted and seasoned with wild herbs, was delicate and flavorful.

His clothes were dry. With a bone needle and woolen thread, he sewed up the long tear in his tunic that had apparently occurred when it was ripped from him. It was a clumsy job, by his mother's standards, but otherwise acceptable.

He felt better wearing clothes, although the tunic seemed to hang loosely upon him, and where it rubbed across his shoulders and his back it made them itch painfully. Still, as he pulled his belt tightly around his waist, at last he felt once more fully human.

As he had worked and eaten, his thoughts had occupied themselves with two things: his immediate tasks, and the greater task of determining his life's direction.

Decisions did not come easily to Makstarn. It seemed as though every major decision required hours—perhaps days—of agonizing. He was cursed, he thought, with too understanding a mind. He could never see one course without seeing also its opposite. He could never listen to one argument without hearing the other side. And it had always seemed to him inexplicable that others could see a right path in only a single direction; that others could never see the wisdom in disagreement, never understand opposing viewpoints.

In retrospect, his own decisions had seemed inevitable. But he knew too that sometimes he had wrestled with them indecisively for far too long

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before accepting them. His decision to leave the tribe: it had crystallized in single omen—the advent of the wolf—and he had acted upon it forthwith. But how long had he mulled the idea before that moment? How many weeks—months—years—had he told himself that some day he would go out into the world beyond? It had been like the funnelling of many tiny streams and brooks into larger streams, and those into a single great river: many thoughts and feelings, many reactions and memories, often diverse, had fed each other until at last there had been a single purpose.

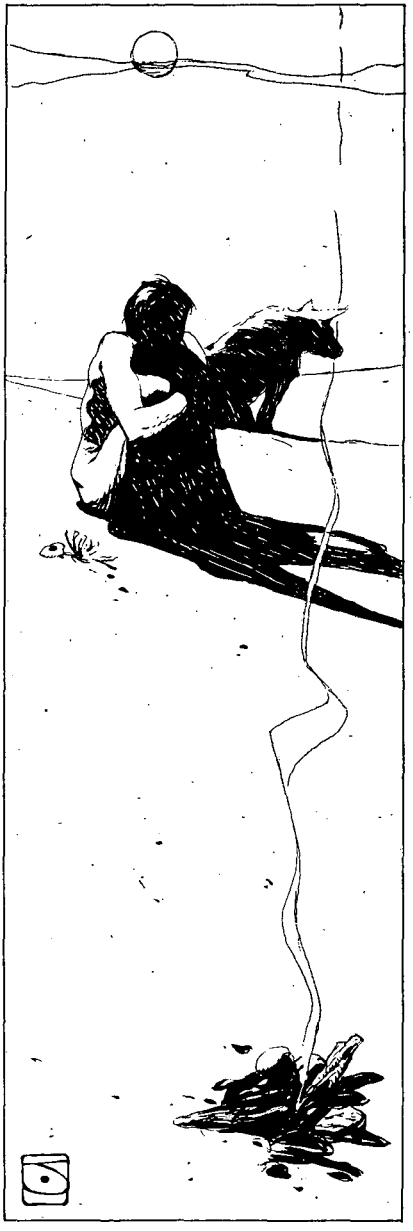
But what now? Had his purpose still any meaning?

He had left his tribe in the dead of night to set out upon a vague and romantic adventure. And he had found instead something quite concrete and deadly unromantic.

Already the scar tissues were forming in his memories even as they were on his face and arms. Already the pain of reality had receded from his memories of the raiders, to be replaced by abstractions, by words. "*They beat me.*" "*They bound me.*" "*They killed me.*" Words. Words that spoke of suffering and inspired outrage, even as he thought them. But not suffering itself; no longer that.

And this experience—this single, overwhelming, transforming experience—had drawn a curtain between Makstarn and his tribal past. In the world in which he now lived, values had shifted; old feelings and fears seemed distant, unreal.

He could, he realized, return to his tribe now. If he chose to. And if indeed the tribe itself remained intact,



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undiscovered by the raiders. The reasons he had fled were no longer meaningful. He was no longer the boy who had endured childish taunts; nothing the tribe's children might try could touch him now.

He tried to conjure up before him the memory of Rifka, as she had revealed herself to him before the fire. He spoke her name aloud, but he could not see her face.

Makstarn spent that night and all the daylight hours of the next day in the sheltered campsite, resting, recuperating. Each time he ate, it was with more appetite; each time he walked it was upon more steady legs.

And when night fell once again, he filled his waterskin, shouldered his pack, and spoke to the wolf. That strange animal seemed to understand, and its body quivered with nervous eagerness, almost as if straining at a leash.

They kept well to the north of the road. With the bulky outline of the western mountains directly ahead of them, they crossed moonlit meadows and ducked under the dappled leaves of low inviting branches. They climbed hills and jumped small gullies. The air was night-fresh, full of the sounds of myriad living creatures, wafting the scents of darkness upon light breezes. They did not go far, that first night, but for Makstarn even a short journey was a significant one. He had made his decision: they would continue west.

It took four days' journey to bring them into the mountains, where, hopeful that the raiders were long distant, Makstarn returned to the road. The way overland was difficult now, for these were no longer gentle foothills, but steep-sided mountains themselves: great shelvings of rock long ago upthrust by unguessable geological disasters; decayed now by eons of erosion by wind, water and rooted plants, but still brutal in their sudden elevations.

The road was the single way that led so deceptively easily up the steep slopes and past craggy cliffs. In places it cut through low escarpments as though carved with a giant knife in tallow. Elsewhere, it wound back and forth up canyons and over low passes. Everywhere it was the same: a wide band of obsidian black pavement that resisted almost all the ravages of time save one—the encroachment of grass and shrubbery as soil drifted or washed across its surface.

For Makstarn it was like stepping from night into day. His panting slogging up the rough mountain slopes became an evenly paced stride along the smooth grade.

It had not been an unsatisfying four days, however. It had been almost enough to follow the wolf across the open countryside, marvelling in all its little hidden beauties and dramas, without concern for destinations or the first goal the mountains represented.

Life in the river lowlands had been rich in its fashion, but tame by comparison. Wildlife there had grown accustomed to man and the proper ways to avoid him. One might sight a muney at dusk and bring it down with a crossbow shaft, and, to be sure, there were always the birds flitting about in

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the trees; and sometimes on the longpoles of the bigger tents—often leaving messes, sometimes stealing food scraps—but life about the tribe was *human* life, in all its mundane and sometime ugly manifestations. Here, a silently moving figure in the scarlet moonlight, Makstarn was an intruder in an alien world—a world that had long forgotten humanity, if ever it had known it.

He had seen muneys at play. He had all but stumbled into a huge underground nest of insects. He had witnessed two battles between larger animals; battles which were inevitably decided in favor of the wolf, no matter who the original victor might have been. The first of these had brought the wolf an animal booty Makstarn had never seen before. The creature, as best he could tell before the wolf began rending it, was shaped not unlike a muney, with the same long tail and long, strong rear legs and short, almost pathetic forearms. But it was three times the size of a muney, and instead of a grey or brown coat, it was striped, black and white. And, when Makstarn could examine its teeth, later, he found them sharply pointed: carnivorous and quite unlike the gnawing chisels of the muney. He wondered if indeed there was any relationship between the two species.

He had been asleep when the second battle had started. He and the wolf had found a nestlike hollow beneath the low branches of an old tree, and had settled into it just as the early morning's heat began to strike the meadow beyond. He had awakened twice during the day to sip at his water and fall asleep again, and the second time he had noticed the wolf's absence. It did not surprise him. He knew the wolf enjoyed its solitary exploratory forays, and that often they would result in the wolf leading him that evening to a nearby stream or pool of water.

What brought him awake that evening was a sudden stiffening of the wolf—once more curled beside him. As he opened his eyes and stared at it, the wolf drew itself into a coiled crouch from which it could spring at any moment. Its ears were up and forward, the ruff at its neck slightly raised. It made no sound, but peered intently out at the meadow.

When Makstarn turned in the direction of the wolf's stare, he was first aware of the mountain looming so close and high over the flat grassy meadow. The sky above was still a deepening blue, but the meadow itself was in purpling shadow, while the mountainside seemed to catch a ruddy glow from the already risen Red Moon. Out in the tall grass there was violent movement, as if something was thrashing about. He strained his ears, but heard nothing. The air was very still. That in itself was significant.

Suddenly a high-pitched scream echoed across the green, and with that the wolf unleashed itself to bound out of their hiding place.

Makstarn jumped to his feet and saw as he did so something with blurred stripes race off through the grass. Then he heard a sharp yelp from the wolf.

Drawing his knife, he ran out into the open. There he saw the wolf anxiously circling its stolen quarry.

At first he could not make out what

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the fallen creature was, even when he had come quite close to it. The wolf growled, angrily, and stopped every little bit to paw at its muzzle before continuing its wary pacing about the thing in the grass.

Then he understood.

What at first had looked like nothing more than a furry ball was a strange creature covered with long, needle-sharp spines. It lay unmoving, and when Makstarn stooped close over it, he saw that the spines protected only its back and sides. Its throat was a bloody gash. It was quite dead.

But yet the wolf would come no closer.

The light was going, but Makstarn dropped to his knees and pulled the wolf to him. The beast made a low whining growl in its throat, but let itself be held by its collar. Once again it raised a forepaw to push at its snout.

Makstarn saw it then: a short broken spine anchored in the outer flesh of the wolf's mouth. He grimaced. It must be quite painful.

Soothingly, he talked to the big animal, pulling its forepaws and front legs into his lap, bending over the overgrown dog to grip its muzzle firmly in his left hand. With his right, he pulled at the spine.

The wolf yelped, and jerked free of him, backing off to stare guardedly at him and growl softly.

Makstarn shook his head and sighed to himself. Again he spoke to the animal, his voice low and confident.

The wolf lowered itself until the front half of its body was pressed almost flat against the ground, while its rear still half-squatted, rump high, tail tucked between its hind legs. Whining to itself, it squirmed on its belly toward him. It was pathetic, and yet it made Makstarn smile. He kept talking to the big beast, his words low-pitched and full of reassurance and entreaty, while the wolf returned its head and forepaws to his lap.

Once more he held its muzzle, but this time he was more cautious with the broken spine. He worked it gently, feeling it catch and tear against its own wound. He knew he was hurting the wolf, and that even yet the wolf trusted him. Carefully, by slow degrees, he withdrew the spine. Half its length was covered with fresh blood; at its end was a wicked barb. The barb still held a bit of red flesh.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAKSTARN HAD SPLIT open the spiny creature's belly with his knife, and he had skinned it, exposing a heavy layer of subsurface fat. But the wolf had wanted nothing of it, either because of a lingering distrust or because the wound to its mouth troubled it too greatly. Makstarn had prayed to the Great Shepherd, in whom he no longer believed at all, that the spine had not been poisoned, and that the wound would soon heal, and then he had followed the wolf away from the skinned corpse, leaving it for its original antagonist or whatever else might choose to claim it.

That had been the last night before they had come back to the road once

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more; their last night hiking up steep slopes and across ever more narrow valleys. The way was difficult, and neither boy nor wolf had much heart for it. Makstarn had led the way south again, the wolf content to follow closely, and they had met the road, curving to meet them, not long before sunrise.

The road led through a series of passes and gaps, always following or creating its own cuts through the sharp folds of the high mountain ridges. It was possible to climb several thousand feet without once securing the kind of panoramic view back toward the east that would show so clearly the heights that had been climbed. Always, no matter how high the road itself had come, nearby peaks and ridges still obscured any but the most immediate view. And always, no matter how exhausted Makstarn came to feel after a day's trudging along the smooth-surfaced road, there seemed to loom higher mountains ahead. He was in the midst of the mountains now, and wondering if indeed they would ever come to an end at all.

The second day in the mountains the air had been quite hot and still, even at midnight. The Red Moon was high overhead when Makstarn felt the sudden cooling touch of a breeze against his arms. The wolf paused to raise its head and sniff the air, and when Makstarn looked back, the eastern sky was dark, the stars and second moon blotted out.

A storm? Yes, lightning flickered somewhere in the distance, momentarily lighting the underside of a massive cloudbank.

It might bring his night's journey to a halt, but he would welcome rain—rain to wash away the dust and sweat from his body, and to replenish the scant streams and pools along the way.

The wind picked up, definitely cooler now, buffeting against his back and whipping up the wolf's fur. Then the silent clouds slipped over the moon, and it was darker than even before dawn. The smell of rain was in the air.

Suddenly the sky split open with a blinding flash of light. Makstarn had a sharp vision of the black road, looming shoulders of the mountains on each side, and the wolf—the wolf's fur seemed to stand out from its body in every direction. Then the darkness was complete, his eyes blind. A great thunderclap struck then, rolling and rebounding from cliffside, and Makstarn fell to his knees.

In the next few moments it seemed as though the gods had chosen this very gap in the mountains as their arena of war. Stark white flashes alternated with utter blackness while thunder echoed and re-echoed into one long deafening peal that seemed to beat down on Makstarn like a drumming of fists.

Through the flashes he caught sight of a low tree, growing against the sheer grey rock of the cut through which the road ran. The tree seemed to spread its branches invitingly, and at its base there appeared a shallow pocket in the face of the low cliff. Grabbing the wolf's collar, he tugged it toward the tree, stumbling in the darkness. The

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wolf seemed rooted to its spot at first, but then reluctantly followed.

The wind died. There was a long moment of silence. Makstarn's ears rang; but he thought he heard something else—like the gallop of many men on mounts, racing up the road.

There was another flash, and then a fresh gust of wind. Directly ahead was the tree; it seemed to grow from under a shelf of rock. Just as they reached it, the wind slammed against them, driving them along the face of the rock, and drops of water, big and hard as pellets, struck against them. Then, with the heavy sound of thudding feet, the storm was upon them, drenching them in moments.

There was no real shelter. The rain tore through the tree overhead, and the wind drove it easily under the scant overhang of rock. Animal and human alike were battered by the heavy torrent. There was only one thing for which to be grateful: the lightning and thunder had moved on.

It grew cold, and in the wet night there was little comfort in lying close to the wolf. But yet the two huddled together in silent misery to wait the storm out.

The rain slackened to a thin drizzle at dawn, and when the wolf shifted, Makstarn awoke. He had not remembered falling asleep, but wakefulness was jarring. He looked up and out.

Across the road, steep slopes climbed toward a nearby mountain peak. The slopes were dotted with grass, scrawny trees, and bare scars of rock. The peak was hidden in the low cloud that hung overhead. Makstarn gasped. Until now he had not realized that they might have climbed this high—he had not dreamed one might come so close to the sky.

The rain made a soft patter upon the dripping leaves overhead, and the wolf had a wet smell he recognized from the many dreary times he had spent guarding the flock in the rain.

He felt tired and aching; he had not felt this way since resuming his journey. His wrists ached and itched, and the back of his head throbbed. He was wet clear through, and cold. He doubted his fire-making equipment would do him any good here and now. The wolf looked up at him mournfully. Its coat was matted and bedraggled. At least its mouth had healed safely.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting there. He would just have to start walking again. Exercise would help.

As the morning wore on, the rain slackened, then stopped, and to the east the sky grew progressively lighter, until at last he could see patches of pale blue.

"Enough blue sky for a shepherd's britches, and the day will be a good one," old Ishmight had sometimes said. Makstarn had never been certain of exactly how much blue sky that should actually be, but he took heart from the saying now. He only wished there was sky with which to make a dry, unsticky tunic.

They had progressed not much farther when Makstarn found the road blocked. Ahead a great tumble of rocks, boulders, and raw earth lay

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across their way.

Looking up the mountainside to his right, he saw the new scar. It looked as though an entire cliff had fallen down upon the road. There was a strange lingering smell in the air, a sharpness that he could not define, but which he recalled from the night before, at the outset of the storm.

He stared at the debris and rubble and wondered why *this* cliff fell and not the one under which they had crouched during the storm. He shivered. It was no longer cold.

It was close to noon when the sun broke through and the sky cleared. Makstarn and the wolf were entering a high pass. He looked back, to the east, and it was as if a veil was pulled from his eyes.

They were very high. And, for once, there were no nearby higher ridges to the east to obscure their view.

The sun slid its rays out across the land: out over the mountains and down their eastern slopes and across the foothills to the flat bottomlands and the broad plains. In the hazy distance, the Great River winked and he could just see where the Small River joined it, a little above the land he'd called home. It was as if he stood at the roof of the world, staring down upon all the lands. He felt a god-like power, and at the same time a vast sense of awe and humbleness.

He looked back upon the road he had climbed, and watched it roll and unwind itself like a great black thread, down through the mountains and out into the distance into which it lost itself and disappeared. Had he come all this way? He shook his head in numb surprise. Here he stood at last upon the western wall: the last known landmark of the world in which he'd lived. What lay beyond? The desert was only a land of tales; no one but his own father had ever seen it within the recent memory of the tribe.

When he came through the final pass, he saw at last the great desert.

It was afternoon, the sun a white orb that hung too low for him to shield his eyes against it. And from the dazzling brightness of the desert the heat seemed to rise to smite him.

He could not actually *see* the desert. He tried to cover his eyes and peek out between two barely separated fingers, but even then his only impression was of whiteness and glare and heat that seemed to bend the air. It was too bright. The sun was too low. Later, when the Red Moon was up, or perhaps near dawn, he would be able to distinguish the features of the desert floor. Now he could tell only that it stretched beyond the horizon. Almost reflexively, he reached for his water.

He caught his hand and paused. That was something else: water would be scarce here. He would have to conserve his water carefully. Food would be less of a problem. From his father's tales he knew that animal life could be found even here. And the wolf had survived this trek once before. If necessary, he could go several days without food. But water . . . that would be the real problem.

Water, and exposure. Only standing here high in a mountain pass overlooking the desert below he felt its

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heat, a furnace beating upon him like the open doors of the pottery kilns when one strayed too close. He could feel his sweat being sucked into the dry air. His clothes were dry. The wolf was panting.

He looked down at the mountainside. Gone was the green vegetation that had covered its eastern slopes. As though a line had been drawn along its highest ridge, the western faces were scarred and barren, the soil dry and shaley, twisted grey shrubs the only growing things. There had been no rain here; not for a very long time. Makstarn felt again an awe for the range of the world beyond that which he had ever known.

They found a gully already deep in shadow, and slept there well into the night. Then, spending their time afoot under the cooler mantle of the moons and stars, sleeping during each progressively hotter day, they made their way along the road and down into the desert itself. It took only three days, including what was left of their first night on the western side of the range.

While still high up, Makstarn saw the desert only as a great flat and featureless expanse of grey and yellow plains. It was hard to believe anything might exist there for long, and more than once Makstarn felt himself slowing his descent, fighting an urge to turn back. It seemed as though everything that man might treasure had been baked or burned from this desert land.

Yet, as they went lower, the shrubbery on the mountain slopes increased, and as the land below grew closer it became less and less featureless. The shrubs were small and twisted plants that resembled nothing so much as dwarfed trees. Their trunks were thick and hard—unbreakable and all but uncuttable. The bark could be peeled in shaggy strips, and there was nothing else to scavenge for cooking fires.

The leaves of the plants were a greenish silver that looked quite grey and dead from a distance. But when he picked one he found it thick and oozing with a tart-smelling ichor.

The shrubs grew larger on the lower slopes. While higher up they'd clung close to the ground, by the time Makstarn had reached the mountain's foot he found them as high as his waist.

Most curious of all, the plants never grew in clumps or patches, but were almost evenly spaced from each other, sometimes only a pace or two, sometimes six or more paces apart. And nothing grew between them. It was as though the land could support nothing else, nothing more.

The mountain itself did not descend into graduated foothills as the eastern slopes had. It fell directly to the desert floor. Perhaps the floor itself might fall off gradually beyond, but there was an almost clean demarcation between desert and mountain, and the way the road straightened out from its angling descent and pointed abruptly west only made it that much more obvious.

The road seemed in poorer repair as it struck out over the desert, and Makstarn was astonished to discover that once in the desert itself he could

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not see far. Like the dried mud in what had once been a mud puddle, the floor of the desert had cracked and turned up at the edges. Here and there worn shelves of rock poked up, long strata at an angle, sharp edges abraded smooth. Gullies and dry washes cut haphazardly across the dry sand and clay, washing out and undermining the road in more than one spot.

There was no lack of vegetation, now that he could view it close to hand, but Makstarn found it singularly unappealing and almost repulsive. There was an uninviting look to this land; it seemed alien, and hostile to intruders. It denied him in his humanity, depriving him of hospitable sights, smells, or sounds. The wind seemed to scrape over the landscape, moving little runnels of sand before it that sometimes whirled into the air to dance like a top.

During the daylight hours, the sun's heat was almost intolerable, even in the shade. His blistered skin had flaked and peeled off after its earlier exposure and burn, and no longer troubled him, but the heat here at midday was oppressive, stifling to breathe. Although he managed to find shade in which to lie and nap, he always woke when the sun was highest, and heard the wolf panting in the heat.

But there was game in the desert, and even water, if one learned how to find it. The wolf was adept at both, sniffing out the spoor of the desert animals and following their paths to water; Makstarn soon found that wherever the ground was sandy he could find the trails of small animals himself.

But the water was usually warm and unpleasant tasting, sometimes only a mud-sink into which water slowly oozed when one scraped away the sand. And the most common form of animal, as he discovered when the wolf brought him one their first night in the desert, was a small brown-furred little rodent—what his father had called a "desert pup." It was no longer than his forearm, tough and scrawny, and good for little more than a single meal.

Nevertheless, because he kept his waterskin filled whenever possible, and stored what game he could in his pack, he neither starved nor went thirsty. And neither, he judged, did the wolf.

He had no idea of the immensity of the desert, and little awareness of the degree of change across it. Indeed, he was relying upon the wolf now, to lead him to whatever its origins might have been. For the time being, the wolf seemed content to follow the road, which curved southward a little at first, and then struck due west. How far the desert might extend, and what might lie beyond it, he could not guess. But he felt charged with a new sense of adventure, newly intrigued with the strange land he was trekking across. Somewhere out here lay the secret of his father—and of the wolf. Whether in the desert, or beyond it, he did not know. But if his father had been able to make the journey—and less providently equipped than he—and the wolf as well, then he was confident.

When they had first descended into the desert, the dwarfed tree-like shrubs had grown more dense, but then they thinned once more, and gave way to a

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kind of plant equally alien to Makstarn's eyes.

These were tall spikes that rose cleanly from the dry soil to thrust perhaps twice his height into the air. Most varied in thickness between that of his arm and that of his torso, the taller ones thickest. But what impressed him was that they did not seem to taper, but climbed directly to their rounded points. Some branched, the branches looking uncannily like arms that thrust out a short ways, and then up, almost as thick as their parent trunk. The trunks of these strange plants were not smooth, but deeply scored with vertical ridges, and while some of these odd plants were smooth-skinned, others were covered with spines that grew in clusters. In the bloody moonlight, the things seemed sentinel-like, alive and brooding.

But these too thinned and then disappeared as the land dipped a little, and grew more rocky. Now one might see small clumps of silvery bushes growing against an upthrust ledge or even from a rock shelf. They seemed to grow where shade would be available at least half the day. When one was close to one, the scent of it was like the odor of death, and Makstarn noticed that the wolf gave them wide berth. When they picked their sites for daytime shade and sleeping, Makstarn tried to avoid those places where the bushes grew.

Other plants also grew here and there, some quite small and inconspicuous. Often a stretch of land beside the road would seem quite barren of life before he turned to walk into it. Then he would find himself picking the way between small shrubs and ground-hugging plants as though following an obstacle course.

It was close to dawn of their fourth day in the desert when Makstarn first saw the wolf nibble at a plant.

He was surprised, for he had never seen the big animal eating vegetation, and had thought it purely a meat-eater. But the wolf had first sniffed at the plant, and then begun awkwardly tearing at it with its teeth, pausing now and then to chew at it with its head cocked at an odd angle, and swallow.

The plant itself was rather like a rounded piece of turf, measuring about a foot across. It looked like thick moss at first, and then Makstarn saw that it had densely growing fleshy stems that rose, in the center where they were tallest, about the length of his middle finger. He found a second growth of the strange plant a short distance away and, quite hesitantly, pulled at a stem. It gave a brittle snap, and came loose in his fingers. He brought it close to his eyes, then sniffed it. In the dim light he could not be certain, but he thought it was glistening damply at its broken end. It had no smell.

Cautiously, he bit into it. The flesh of the stem seemed to burst in his mouth, and suddenly he was swallowing a cool, refreshing, sweetish liquid. He chewed some more. The stem yielded its cool soothing juices and then was limp and stringy. He spat it out and reached for another stem. It was some time—already the sun's rays were brimming over the mountains to the east—before they both had quenched their thirsts with the odd plants. Makstarn rubbed his forehead

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and yawned.

CHAPTER SIX

AFTER A MONTH in the desert, Makstarn became convinced that there was no end to it.

The desert had changed him. Although he had stayed out of direct sunlight as much as possible, his skin was burned darker, and his hair was bleached a deep copper. His skin had thickened and become leathery, his hands and feet developing tough calluses. His eyes grew to a perpetual squint, and if he were to come upon someone who had known him—something he sometimes fantasied in those drifting moments before real sleep—he would probably not be recognized. He was at once thinner and more solid. The desert seemed to have distilled in him his essences and forced him to sweat off and discard every unnecessary ounce of fat and tissue. He had gained weight on his calves, thighs, shoulders and arms. His chest was broader; the tunic was almost too snug on him now. He had lost weight from his middle, his hips and buttocks, from his neck and jowls and cheeks. He looked years older.

Scars of pale flesh banded his wrists; the scar across his face gave him a look that would forever set him apart from sheep-herders.

He had learned things from the desert. He had learned suspicion, and he had learned to take nothing for granted—even luck.

The first thing he had learned was that plants in the desert jealously guarded their water. This was not a total wasteland; it sometimes rained here during the summer—and, possibly, more often during the winter. There *was* water, if you dug for it, or knew where to look for it. Sometimes there was even water above ground. But this mostly near the mountains in the east.

The plants established claim. A plant would take root and grow, developing a root structure many times greater than that which showed above ground, and sending these roots out in all directions in search of water. There was not enough water to support another plant within that immediate area. Any plant which took root within another's established claim would die. So plants grew apart, their separateness determined by the amount of water available below ground.

Once the water was found, it would be stored within the plant in special water cells. Sometimes these cells were part of the arterial system of the plant itself, and would contain the sugars gleaned from photosynthesis in the leaf systems. Sometimes they were in separate storage resevoirs.

Usually, they would be guarded against attack from other water-seekers.

Makstarn learned that the short, fleshy-stalked plant that seemed so full of water was good to eat when dawn approached. There were two reasons. To begin with, the plants lost water during the day, and would seem half withered by dusk. But more important,

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they contained a substance that made him sleepy. It did not seem to affect the wolf, but soon after Makstarn would fill his mouth with the sweet water, he would feel languor creeping over him—even if it was just dusk, and he had slept the whole day.

Other plants had different protection. One had a leathery bark that was impossible to cut, and would allow the plant to be bent without breaking. Another tasted vile. And yet another sent only spindly stems of dried-looking wood above ground, but—as he discovered when he scuffed his toe against the base of one—swelled into a barrel at the ground line.

That one he investigated. While the wolf sniffed about curiously, he dug in the dried clay around the plant and tried to estimate the size and depth of the barrel.

The plant extended only short withered twigs into the air, these terminating in clumps of thin, spiney leaves. He tried grasping the twig-like branches in a single handful and pulling, but only ripped skin from his palms in the attempt.

The wolf seemed to snort in disgust, and moved off to investigate beyond the next rock shelf.

The thing was rooted solidly in the ground. Digging again with his knife, and using a flat stone as well, he excavated a hole around the plant.

The barrel was as thick as his thigh, and seemed to be about twice that long, tapering off into a large taproot. Smaller roots radiated out from it from ground-level down. These Makstarn mercilessly cut.

Again he tugged at it. The remaining side-roots broke free, but the taproot held. He dug some more. Then he began hacking at the root with his knife.

He had begun while the sun still hung just above the western horizon. Before he finished, he was working by the thin light of the stars, neither moon yet up. Sweat poured from his body. He wondered if the plant could replace as much water as he'd lost in this effort.

Finally the thing came free. It was heavy as he tugged it up over the lip of the hole, letting it fall on its side on the ground while he regarded it.

Immediately, a stream of tiny black things began emerging from holes he'd not noticed about the top of the barrel. They were tiny insects, round-bodied, moving on almost invisible legs. They poured out like water itself. Makstarn hastily retreated from them.

With an eager bound, the wolf hopped down from the rock shelf. It approached the uprooted plant, and sniffed at the little insects. Then its tongue swept out and in one lick it had caught the greatest number of the black swarm. Avidly, the wolf watched and waited for more to emerge, lapping them up as soon as they began to congregate in masses. Makstarn stared at him and then shook his head. He could eat a lot of things, but . . .

When he sliced the top off the barrel, he found the answer to the horde of bugs.

The plant was a symbiote. It appeared to have learned to live in a pattern of coexistence and mutual cooperation with the insects that infested it. It had created for them a cyst that had

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eventually swelled to barrel size, and had supplied it water.

The insects in turn had divided the barrel's interior into segmented cells, in which they went through a slow process of absorbing and secreting the water as a thin paste. The plant extended a new root network into this area, along the walls of the cells—either to add more water or to draw upon the newly supplied food, it was impossible to tell; perhaps both.

Immediately he had the top off the barrel, the wolf was at it, and he had to tug the beast back. Cautiously, he dipped a finger into a cell of paste.

It tasted at once sweet and tart, and seemed to burn a little as it went down his throat, as though strangely spicy. He did not try another sample immediately, but let the wolf poke its snout into the barrel and lick at it.

The sweet taste made him remember the plant with the sleeping-water. He wondered if this too would make him drowsy.

As he sat upon his heels, he rocked and rested, feeling the sweat still heavy on his back and brow, and the dry oppressive heat still radiating from the land about him. He looked up at the stars. In this clear air they seemed much brighter, much closer. He could distinguish colors among them, like winking jewels in the Shepherd's Cloak.

A soft breeze whiffed by him, and it felt deliciously fresh. He came lightly to his feet and felt the energy pouring into his muscles. The landscape glowed under the carpeting light of the stars, and it seemed to call out to him, beckoningly.

He pushed the wolf away from the open barrel and brought out a handful of the paste. He stuffed his mouth with it, and let it dissolve to trickle intoxicatingly down his throat, spitting out the rootlets and waxy cell walls when he had sucked them dry.

A scent was on the air, spicy and fragrant. He wanted to chase after it, but a cooler part of his mind cautioned against it. He felt good; very good. He lifted the barrel and thrust it under his left arm, much to the wolf's annoyance. He laughed at the wolf; it was a comical sight, its head covered with the sticky residue of the paste. The wolf smiled up at him, its tongue slurping smugly out and around its jowls.

They travelled a good distance that night, and did not finish the contents of the barrel until long after the new Red Moon was up, not so very long before dawn, and that night the desert was an enchanted and beautiful place.

Sleep had been no problem, but waking was. Makstarn felt sick to his stomach, and yet he could not even retch. His stomach felt knotted into a tiny ball, his throat tight and constricted.

What had happened last night? he wondered.

He looked around. It was late afternoon; he had slept through the midday heat! He was lying in a gully that undercut an upthrust finger of rock, the slab forming a nearly perfect roof for shade. His pack was under his head, and beside it a large brown object.

At the sight of it, he remembered.

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And as he remembered; he reached for it.

It was empty. Worse than empty: scraped bare. Only a faint spicy odor still clung to it. The odor did things to him.

The world beyond the gully looked painfully harsh; the light sent signals of pain to his brain.

His mouth watered as he stared at the empty wood-like barrel. He tasted the fragrant paste again, and his stomach seemed to relax for a moment.

He sat up, and for a moment he thought he had struck his head against the overhead shelf. The pain was sudden and shocking, like a blow. He stared down the gully, and the wolf raised its head and returned his stare. Its eyes seemed watery, and it made no attempt to rise. It made a low, almost inaudible whine. The sound hurt Makstarn's ears.

He was thirsty. He pulled the neck of the waterskin to his lips. But he could not swallow. The stuff tasted brackish, dead. He wondered if it had gone bad. Yet, he needed something—food?

He had very little left in his pack: only a few dried hunks of bread. It had been made by mashing the roots of a domesticated vine into meal and then baking it for hours. One soaked it with water, milk, or gravy. Shepherd's Bread, they called it. It was like a rock. He broke loose a few crumbs and tried to eat them. He gagged on them.

Only a few paces away, he found the familiar clump of twigs with their spiny leaves. With dogged effort he knelt in the long-shadowed sunshine and dug the plant free. Its barrel was considerably smaller—only about half the size of the first—but that simply sped the task.

Once he had it out of the ground, he returned, sweating profusely and feeling strangely chilled, to the gully. There he laid the plant on its side.

A thick wave of tiny black bugs swarmed out. The wolf raised itself on its forelegs to stare at them, then licked at them half-heartedly. And then again.

Makstarn worked almost feverishly at cutting the top off, not even waiting for all the black bugs to crawl out. A few made their way up his arms. He ignored them.

The paste tasted rich and creamy; cool and delicious. It slid down his throat like fresh curds. His body seemed at once to relax and gather strength. He looked out into the desert again. The sun was near the horizon, the sky streaked with vivid colors. The desert itself seemed alive with rich hues of browns, yellows, reds and greys, dotted here and there with tiny moments of green. As he watched, a desert pup some forty paces off skittered out of its hole in the ground, ran a short distance, then sat up on its hind legs to survey the scene.

The wolf's ears rose. In one leap it was out of the gully and bounding out over the clay banks and sand flats.

Makstarn heard its tiny squeak of alarm and then saw the desert pup run—not toward his hole but away from it—in futile confusion. The wolf was on it all too quickly. There was a short high shriek, and the animal was dead, dangling from between the wolf's proud jaws.

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Makstarn took a strong pull of water, then gnawed free a hunk of bread, alternating bites of it with handfuls of the spicy paste. When the wolf returned, he shared the stuff with that animal while it munched at the small pup.

Again it seemed to Makstarn they travelled a long distance that night. They set out early, just after dusk, and they moved with a quick stride over the road's smooth pavement. Here and there the road was less smooth, blowing sand having pitted its surface, or drifting entirely over it. But these were things of no moment, for Makstarn was full of the sights and smells and sounds of the vast, rich desert, breathing deep breaths and stretching his legs to keep pace with the almost trotting wolf. From time to time he would dip into the barrel for more paste, and then he would take more and let the wolf lick it from his fingers. The wolf was—he chuckled in delight to himself—a wolf about the stuff; he had to dole it out or it would be far too quickly finished.

For more than a week they followed this pattern, Makstarn learning to save a little of the paste for when they woke, to forestall the pains. He did not try to reason it out, but it seemed to him that this stuff, this desert nectar, had the effect of acclimating a person to the desert. Heat seemed to have much less effect upon him. He needed less food and water, and that which he consumed he tended to use without eliminating much. He was imbued with energy and it propelled him across the desert at a startling pace.

The wolf too seemed to crave and need the stuff. Its reflexes grew sharper, its eyes and ears keener for prey, and it could cover the ground at his side for hours without either of them feeling exhaustion.

The only problem came when they ran out of the plants.

Makstarn awoke as usual, near dusk. The residual ache lay behind his eyes, but he did not think; he simply reached for the last handful of the nectar. Half he ate; the other half he gave to the wolf. It was a very sharing sort of thing. Then he rose, and began looking for a new plant.

Sometimes he had found them in clusters, sometimes widely scattered. When possible, he had learned to take one closer to the size of his second plant. It was easier to dig free, and easier to carry.

There didn't seem to be any immediately about. He climbed the outcropping of rock they'd slept against, and scanned the nearby area.

The land had changed again. It seemed to be all chipped flat plains and shelves of rock. There were few plants growing in the area . . . very few plants at all.

To the west the land seemed to dip from sight; then a low wall of rock cut across from south to north, beyond. The whole area was a reddish orange, with darker streaks that suggested exposed strata in the rocks. Overhead, the sky was purpling.

He needed the damned plant! Where was it?

That night they did not go on.

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Instead, Makstarn rolled himself into a tight ball and wept to himself. He wept for all the things that he did not have, for the loss of joy and happiness and life and strength. And then he threw up what little was in his stomach, and wept for that too, tears streaming down his cracked face.

In a moment of lucidity he became aware of the wolf. It was thrashing about, its head jammed into the empty barrel. There was no point to that; he'd already cleaned it dry. The wolf was making strange noises, but he stopped hearing them.

Later his bowels let go, and his bladder, and he felt like a small boy, lying sick in his mother's tent and full of shame. He lay on his side, curled into a ball, and rocked and moaned.

It was an enlightening experience, and if it had proved only one thing, that was that a wolf can make mistaken choices in its food as easily as can a human. But this was not a point Makstarn was to dwell upon for some time.

When day dawned, the heat drove Makstarn awake.

For a long moment he wondered where he was and sensed a strange doubling of his life. He was lying naked upon the sand, abandoned by the raiders/he was lying clothed upon a crumbling rock shelf amid the effluvia of his own sickness.

Then his mind cleared, and it was a different kind of clarity than he had known for days.

His eyes felt full of grit, and his body itched with its own filth. When he stood, his legs threatened to buckle, and he shook with sudden fatigue. But he could stand. He could open his eyes. There was that.

He looked slowly around, cataloguing his surroundings. Rock: barren: empty. They were not under shelter. The sun would soon be stronger.

The wolf lay stretched out on its back in an odd position, its back arched. It did not move. Flecks of white foam were still at the edges of its mouth.

For a moment he thought it dead, and his heart seemed to turn over and his stomach seize again. Then he saw the shallow movement of the animal's chest and knew that it was still breathing; still alive.

A sick odor seemed to surround the shelf. He realized that some of it clung to him. It made him feel uncomfortably unclean.

The wolf's legs made running movements in the air, and it moaned, the sudden sound loud in the empty land. Makstarn leaned over it and stroked its chest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY SWEATED out the day together in what meagre shade they could find. Makstarn had felt an unpleasant shock when he discovered there was no adequate shelter from the sun. It was after all the same place in which they'd spent the previous day, and he had slept in the shade then, had he not?

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He had not.

Dusty memories reawakened: he had lain against the side of a low outcropping of rock. It had cast its scant shade only in the morning hours. At midday it had been—and still would be—useless. And in the afternoon it had caught and reflected the merciless rays of the blindingly white sun.

How had he endured this?

He tried to sort his memories out, but they were weak and fragmented—they skittered off in many directions when he sought to group them and order them. He remembered momentary things: colors, sounds, smells and tastes. But like the colors scattered from a ray of sunshine by the prism of a drop of water, they were diffuse, and vanished when pursued.

Both he and the wolf were weak: tired, thin and drained of life and energy. It was as if they had each exhausted most of their bodily reserves. The wolf—had his coat not seemed rich and gleaming such a short time ago?—was so thin and mangy in appearance that Makstarn was frightened when he looked at the beast. With each heaving breath, the wolf's ribs stood out in stark relief. Its long face was thin to the point of emaciation, cheeks sunken against its narrow skull, eyes clouded and sad beyond belief. Its tongue hung loosely from its weakly gaping jaws as it panted for relief from the heat. It raised its tail once, as if in a mordant salute—*we're in this together, brother*—then let it fall back into the dry dust with an exhausted flop.

Makstarn tried to eat, but food tasted thin and unpleasant—like meat without salt. What water he had left he sipped sparingly, after rinsing his mouth with it. He felt as if he had come through a long and fevered illness.

That evening, when the sun had fallen below the desert's western edge, he stripped off his scant clothes and scrubbed first himself and then his clothing in the dusty sand that had collected in the pockets of the rock shelves. It was less than ideal, but at least it removed some of the smell.

That night he went back up to the road and followed it the short distance west to its abrupt end.

The road led directly to the edge of a chasm. There abutments of the same black obsidian of which the road was made rose to form low walls on either side of the way. But the walls too ended at the chasm, sheared away like cleanly fractured glass. Makstarn crawled on his belly to the very edge of the chasm and peered down into it.

The road actually overhung the chasm itself by half a body's length. Makstárn gripped tightly against the weathered edges as vertigo caught him and threatened to raise up the road and tip him over. His heart raced with unexpected fear. But he made himself remain, to stare purposefully into the chasm and try to chart its details.

In the light of the Red Moon, it seemed a bottomless rift in the desert floor: the cleavage was not wide—no more than thirty paces—but too deep for its lower depths to be visible. Directly opposite, on the other side, the road resumed again, with its low

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flanking walls. At one time it had bridged this canyon; now it did not.

Makstarn calmed his feverish nerves by staring fixedly at that opposite side. How to gain it? A leap—even a long, running leap—was impossible. If anything, the opposite wall of the chasm was higher. He tried to measure it with his eyes. Yes: higher. It seemed unreachable.

How had the wolf crossed it, then? *Had* the wolf indeed come from that side? Why assume that the wolf came from farther west? Or that it had followed the road as he had?

But surely, his mind replied, the wolf did not originally come from this desert. This wolf had already known man: it wore a collar. And no man lived upon the wretched face of this land.

The chasm must be crossed, then, if it could in fact be crossed. How? By the only way that remained: climbing down its walls and crossing its bottom to climb up the other side. It was a simple answer, difficult only in the execution.

He let the wolf make the choice: would they go north, or south? Unhesitatingly, the wolf turned north, setting out along the canyon's rim, nosing at those breaks in its wall which suggested the possibility of paths leading down, whining and turning back again to move further on. Could it remember its previous trail? Makstarn wondered.

Two nights' journey north brought them to a place where the canyon was wider, the walls less vertical. It had been a difficult two nights, for neither man nor beast were yet fully recovered from their experience with the drugged paste.

Finally they found a place where they could descend into the canyon. Here the shelving rock formed a series of steps down which Makstarn and the wolf carefully climbed. Daylight had revealed an even stronger reason for reaching the canyon bottom: edging among the shadows, ducking in and out of sight, was a narrow stream of running water.

There too grew a profusion of green plants, grasses, even low trees, and Makstarn knew the uplift of hope—the hope of more abundant animal life. The canyon rim had been barren of both food and water, and they shared empty bellies now.

It took half another night to reach the bottom. Then, while Makstarn rolled about happily in the shallow water of the stream, the wolf disappeared on a hunting mission. While he waited, Makstarn rolled stones into the stream and built a simple dam to widen it into a pond. His stomach still growled at him, but the water helped. The touch of it upon his skin was as satisfying as its taste. He shed the dust of many desert miles and felt cleansed and refreshed for the first time in many weeks. It was, he mused, a very different feeling than that he had known while consuming the paste, but at once as vital and more real. Colors neither glowed nor vibrated, and he felt none of the skin-tingling charge of the drug. Yet he felt alive—and glad to be alive. It was, he decided, a deeper, more basic feeling: the pleasure of the fulfillment of an elemental need.

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By the time the wolf had returned, Makstarn had a fire going, and propped over it a rude pot made of bark and mud, in which he was cooking a variety of bulbs and tubers—roots dug from the stream bank where the foliage flourished most luxuriantly. Among them were a pungent-smelling rush which reminded him of the leeks which grew along the river at home. Also in the pot were a handful of small snails, plucked from among the thick grasses. The wolf brought back a rodent which looked like a younger cousin to the desert pups upon which they'd been subsisting. The beast dropped its catch before Makstarn and sat back on its haunches to look up to him for approval. Makstarn reached out to rumple the wolf's fur at its neck and the back of its head and then the animal nodded, an almost human bow of recognition, and turned to pad away once more into the night.

Makstarn skinned the rodent, cleaned it, and added it to his stew. Life was incredibly profuse here; he wondered if this canyon bottom was not some sort of hidden oasis in the harsh clime of the desert. Could men live here? And might they not? But, he admitted to himself, if they did they left no signs. And that he regarded as unlikely.

They spent two days on the canyon floor, eating and resting and regaining their health. The tall walls of the canyon cast ample shade at all but the noon hour, water and game were plentiful, and somehow Makstarn found himself at peace in this place, loath to move on. He washed and mended his clothes, working over them with needle and thread, his fingers clumsy but increasingly adept. Necessity makes the best teacher. The wolf, as if it too was aware that they must stock up here for the journey that lay yet beyond, spent long hours hunting the small rodents, bringing them to Makstarn one after another. No, if man had lived here, the pickings would never have been so good. And even they must soon exhaust the bounty—desert ecology and oasis ecology no less hangs in a delicate balance. To stay here too long would be to ravage it.

Makstarn kept his stewpot going continually, adding new meat and vegetables as he served himself each meal. The extra meat he cut in thin strips, salted, and laid out on racks of green wood over the coals of a separate fire, to which he added green grass for the smoke. Dried to lightweight crisps, the meat although uncooked would keep indefinitely in this hot dry climate, and made an ideal meal to be slowly chewed while afoot.

And so it came to pass that at last they made their ascent upon the western wall of the canyon, even the wolf eager to resume the journey, and they gained again the barren face of the desert, veering south towards an eventual rendezvous with the road.

Two weeks later, Makstarn sighted the western rim of mountains. He had been a long time in the desert now; indeed, the season was shifting. He had seen it first in the stars, as the southern constellations began moving closer to the horizon until at last they had

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dipped from sight, and then confirmed it in the shorter days and longer nights. The summer was drawing to a close, and the dark hours were becoming comfortably cooler.

At first he thought it was a cloudbank on the horizon. He had seen clouds occasionally in the sky. Indeed, he'd seen rainstorms—long ways away. Clouds would sometimes drift across the hot dry land trailing dark columns of water and flashing tiny sparks of lightning, but never coming close, never passing over his head. Rain on the desert was an isolated phenomenon.

But he remembered from the fund of stories his mother had passed on from his father the tale of the great storm which had swept the desert, producing floods and leaving a sudden growth and flowering of every variety of plant in its wake. That storm had been no solitary raincloud, sprinkling its water daintily upon scanty patches of land. It had rolled over his father with all the fury—he suddenly made the association—of the storm which had caught him in the eastern mountains.

For a time he had reflected upon that thought with a feeling not unlike pride. They'd shared those experiences, he and his father. It was a common tie. "As the father, so also the son," old Ishmight had sometimes mumbled. And the desert, too: they alone had braved its inferno wastes. Yes, it was something to think about: in a curious way he was finding his father—within himself.

It was not a cloudbank. It remained too low, too fixed. Each dawn it was there, and again when he awakened at dusk, the sun a fat yellow blob settling behind it. And eventually he saw it for what it was: a ridge of mountains that travelled the entire width of the horizon, north to south.

His feelings, when he confirmed the fact of the mountain range, were not as he'd expected. He had spent months crossing this vast inland desert, and he might have felt joy to see the desert's end in sight. But he felt a curious sense of disappointment, it was almost an anticlimax. He had anticipated something more . . . He had, before ever seeing the desert, without knowing it as more than a land of legend, expected something mysterious of it. What? A revelation? He did not know. Answers, perhaps, to questions he did not know how to voice.

And it had been only a desert.

At last the rim of the western mountains stood high before him, brown, with distinct ridges visible where once had stood only a vague blue-purple sawtooth on the horizon. And the irony left a bitter taste in his mouth, because here at last, this close to his goal, he had come to his end.

He lay weakly against a hard ledge and stared with unfocussed eyes at the panting wolf. He faced west. Toward the mountains. The inaccessible mountains.

The road climbed steadily into the near distance towards the mountains' feet. The end was in sight—unreachably in sight.

He belched, his breath fetid. He had been belching for two days, his stomach in revolt against the treatment he had accorded it. His skin felt dry,

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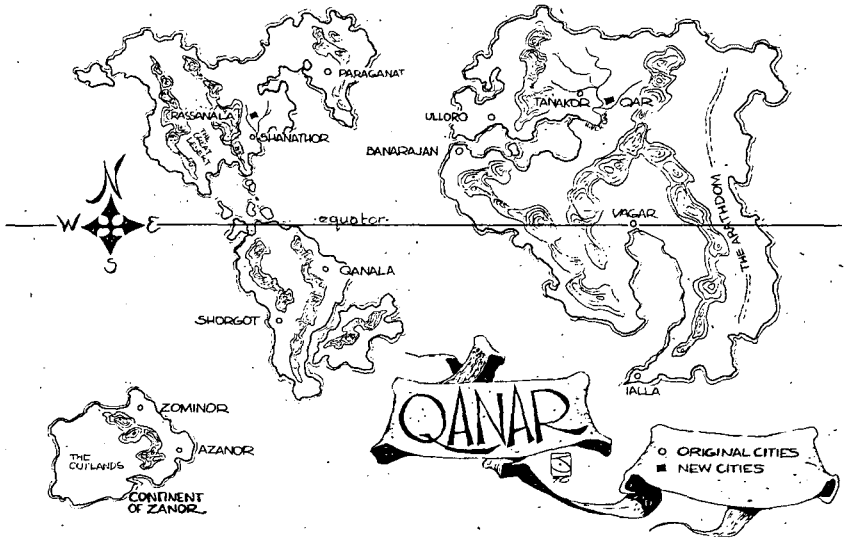

loose and scaly. The sun was peeping over the ledge at his back, but its heat brought forth no sweat from his itching skin.

It had been a hard journey, these last few days. The land was bleak, criss-crossed in random patterns with upthrust veins of porous black rock. Nothing seemed to grow here; the land was hard, all silica and lava. When he left the road to seek shelter from the sun the rock slashed his feet. There was no trace of water. They'd seen no animal life in nine days, no water for six days. He'd shared the last of his dried meat with the wolf three days ago. His waterskin had been empty for two days, and for that last day it had held urine, brown and bitter, not water.

His mind felt fuzzy and indistinct. Water starvation had reached his brain. When he moved his hand to the knife at his belt, he did so without real strength and he fumbled it, losing it in a clatter on the rocks. They had come but a short way this last night. And several times he had stumbled and fallen, to rise without knowledge of where he was or how he'd come to be there. He had focussed his attention upon the road, fixing it as a simple directive: *keep to the road. Keep going and stay on the road.* Once he had glanced at the stars and felt a vast confusion before he slowly realized that he'd turned around; he was walking east. A sharp illuminating clarity of mind had possessed him for a time then, and he had known that no hope lay back along that way. They could never retrace their steps in time, never make that last mud sink before dropping dead upon the road. Hope, or what remained of it, lay westward.

Death did not frighten him. That was not what frightened him.

He hugged himself against the

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cramp of hunger that momentarily seized him. He picked up the knife again and poked with it half-heartedly at the rocks. There were no loose stones here to be tipped over. He remembered how, three days ago, the wolf had pawed and snuffled at a large flat rock. When at last he understood the animal's message, he had gotten his hands under it, strained it up and tipped it over, hoping to find a lizard or a snake. Instead there were only a few white grubs, no more than a single knuckle in length and only a handful in quantity. The wolf had paused to look at him, as if offering him the first opportunity. When he had not taken it, the wolf lapped most of the grubs up with its tongue and then turned to look at him again. *Don't you want any?* its eyes had said, and Makstarn, no longer able to afford the luxury of fastidiousness, had scooped them wiggling into his hand, gagged, and then forced them into his mouth. Surprisingly, they had little taste, a sort of sweet wateriness, and once he'd swallowed them he wished for more. He'd even tilted up other stones in the area, without luck. The wolf had sat upon its haunches, regarding him without enthusiasm: It had found what there was to be found: its sensitive nose had scouted out all there was to be had, here. Further rock tipping was a waste of time, and nothing more.

It still was—and there were no rocks to be tipped here. Only solid slabs joined implacably to each other.

He looked again at the wolf, the memory stirring him: he loved the wolf. His eyes stung, but no tears came. He had long since ceased to regard the wolf as just a large animal, an overgrown dog or a pet. The wolf was his companion, his friend, his partner. The wolf had helped nurse him back to life, had accepted his ministrations in its time of need, had even gone upon that binge of intoxication with him. It had gone with him, uncomplaining, into the desert: a desert it must have known better and cared for far less than Makstarn had. The wolf had been the hunter, the provider. Without his crossbow, Makstarn was no match for the wolf as a hunter, and scant use to it.

In truth, the wolf had been responsible for seeing Makstarn this far across the savage desert. Without the wolf he doubted he would have understood half so much about desert survival, or come nearly so far.

Which only made the task he contemplated more difficult, more frightening.

He wanted to cry, to feel the tears of innocence and childhood once more. But he could not cry. His eyes were dry and burning.

He held the knife loosely in his hand and hefted it. The bright untarnished metal gleamed in the sunlight.

Another day upon them. More heat. The air was sucking them dry. The wounds and abrasions on his feet and knees were black: they had not bled. The blood was too thick, too sluggish to bleed freely. They could not survive. Perhaps the wolf might last a little longer than he, but neither could go on, and they both must surely die here.

The choice must be made. He knew that. But he could not face it. Not yet.

He wished his mind would work

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more clearly. The decision demanded it, but he could not think. A memory flaunted itself: food. He belched, a dry hot breath of fetid air. Odd his stomach should feel so heavy now.

He turned his dulled gaze back at the wolf, whose stare he had been avoiding. The wolf looked back at him, and he began to hallucinate . . .

The wolf was standing up, pushing itself up onto its hind legs, changing as it did so into a man, wearing the skin of a wolf. The man was not tall, but he was broad-shouldered and thick-waisted, his chest a barrel that rose and fell as he breathed heavily in the heat. Makstarn stared at the man's face and recognized in it a reflection of his own, but older.

"Father," he cried out. "Is it really you?"

"*Yes, my son,*" the man answered. "*It is I. I have been with you this long time, guarding you, guiding you along the difficult path you have chosen. And you have made the right choices. You must not falter now.*"

"But—father!" he cried in anguish. "I can't! Not—you!"

"*You must.*"

"But I came to this place seeking you!"

"*And you have found me.*"

"It is not—right!"

" '*Right*'? *That is a man's word. It is not a word this land recognizes. You are bound here by the rules of the land, not the rules of men.*"

"I—cannot," Makstarn said. "I must obey the rules of my heart."

"*Then you must die. And here I will die with you. For only one can live to survive beyond this spot. One must take the life of the other, that he can live. You know this. There is no other choice—only this one: which shall die? That is what you must decide.*"

"But—if I should kill . . . you . . . I would lose all that I sought," Makstarn pleaded, knowing he was pleading not with his father but the inexorable rule of the land, against which there could be no pleading. He was pleading with the rock and the sun and the empty air.

"*As you live, so shall I live within you,*" his father told him. "*When you die, I too shall vanish at last from this world, so very far from my own.*" And as he said this, he sank down into a squatting position and then laid himself forward on the hot rocky ground to become once more the wolf . . . and the waking dream faded.

Only the decision remained.

One must be sacrificed for the other's life. Only one could survive. Only if one of them furnished the other with the necessary food and liquid, prolonging the survivor's life, could either one of them chance reaching the close by mountains. In order for one to live, the other must die. It was as simple as that.

He stared with fascinated horror at his gleaming knife. It seemed to turn itself over and over in his unwilling fingers.

One of them must die. Or both would die.

Which one? It was his decision.

Suicide—or murder?

The sun rose higher in the sky, and the day grew hotter.

—Ted White

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DREAD EMPIRE

JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by MIKE KALUTA

Here again is the Traveller in Black—who has many names, but a single nature—to meet for perhaps the last time with the Forces of Chaos in Cleftor Heights, near Rotten Tor. . . A collection of these stories, including "The Wager Lost by Winning," in our April issue last year, and those published earlier in British magazines, will be published soon by Ace Books.

Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos, is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word . . .

—Pope: *The Dunciad*

I

"GOOD MORROW, sir," the folk said civilly to the man in black who stood leaning on a staff of unusual substance, watching them fetch and carry water from the Gander's Well. He answered in turn, but absently, preoccupied, and none of them marked him so closely as to recognise him again. It was plain that he was taken up with private thoughts.

Indeed, so absorbed was he in his own reflections that the sun dipped down and the boys and goodwives whose chore it was to collect the water had gone home for supper, before he stirred a pace from where he'd wasted the day. Then it was to address a man, well muffled against the evening cool, who came to scrape a few flakes of punk from a rotten tree-stump, not a great distance from the well's mouth, and drop them into a pottery jar.

Seeing him then apply a fizzling wick of braided withes, the traveller said, "You go a journey, I take it, sir!"

"Why, yes!" the man said, glancing up. "I'm called to see my sister, who's in labour with a nephew for me; her man's abroad, and someone responsible should be by to take her other bairns in charge."

"And this you'll use for tinder?" said the traveller, pointing with his staff at the tree-stump.

"None better can be found in this vicinity," said the man. "All who must go a trip by night make use of it. It carries fire through the most amazing

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storms! In fact, it's said"—but here he coughed, as though by way of apology for seeming to give credit to such a superstition—"there's some bright spirit in it, that fosters the sparks against all odds. If you, sir, whom I judge to be a stranger, think of continuing your walk by night, I counsel you should do the same. More than once friends of mine have been grateful for it, thinking to finish a journey in daylight and then coming on a washed-out bridge, or flooded ford!"

"But does your sister live so far away?" the traveller asked. "As yet, there's light in the sky; there's an hour or two before full dark."

"Hmph!" said the man, straightening as he capped his tinderjar and tossed aside the wick of withes, to sputter on ground made wet by water spilled from buckets day-long dipped in the well. " 'Tis plain you're a real stranger, sir! Needs must I go by Cleftor Heights, and there the dark comes quick, believe you me! Indeed, if you'll forgive me, I must make haste, even with this to save me in the pitch-black."

"One final question," said the traveller, and gestured with his staff. "I've seen the folk tramp weary miles from town to fetch yoked pails of water from this well. Is it regarded as especially sweet?"

The man chuckled. "Why, sir, not especially," he returned. "But, see you, the season's on us to brew ale and beer, and—for what reason I know not—if you brew with water from the Gander's Well, you remain lively and jolly all evening long, and the morning after

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your head's clear and your belly calm. Be sure in the taverns of the town they offer you nothing else; sometimes they'll try to fool a stranger with a worse concoction."

"Thanks for the counsel," said the traveller in black.

When he was alone, he shook his head sorrowfully. Once on the site of this stump Yorbeth had brooded in the guise of a tree, and a tap-root had fed his many branches with miraculous sap, bringing forth unexpected fruit. Then a sad greedy fool of a packman had desired to know to what use the wares could be put that annually he collected from this place, to carry about the country and sell for the making of spells, and had had his wish granted, and being mortal . . .

A stump, yielding tinder for night-time walkers, beside a well whose chiefest renown was for the brewing of beer!

Yet it was not entirely to be wondered at. It was of a piece with all the rest of what he'd learned during this, the latest of so many journeys undertaken in accordance with the obligations which bound him. Latest? Not impossibly, he was beginning to believe, *the last*.

For once it had made small difference that this journey was *this* journey, not the one before or after; in chaos randomness was so extreme, the very contrasts made for a sense of uniformity. Now there were actual changes; the vanishing of Yorbeth not the greatest!

Back beyond Leppersley, Farchgrind was a household pet. The people heard him still, but conjured him to entertain their friends and scoffed at his bragging promises. Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes had spent his substance, whatever the nature of it might be, and wearied of his struggle against the past. Footsteps left by those who marched up his hill endured an hour or more.

And Barbizond had gone with Ryovora, despite Sardhin. The progress of rationality had worn him down—that bright being in his rainbow-gleaming cloud. It was still claimed that a knife from Barbizond would keep its edge forever, but the only man who'd mentioned the notion to the traveller this trip had been a sober farmer in Kanish-Kulya, and he'd employed the same diffident tone as the man just departed, the one who'd been embarrassed at reference to a spirit in the punk which carried fire so well.

That farmer was an earthy man leading a sober life, a little puzzled now and then when one of his fat and happy ploughmen brought some improbable growth to show him: a bunch of grapes that shone like polished metal, a turnip which, split apart, revealed the chambers of a human heart . . .

But his wine was plentiful and sweet, and there was never a lack of roasts to grace the spits in his kitchen, so, he bothered his head not at all with traces of another age. Even the ancestry of his daughter-in-law was a source of kindly jokes around his table. Time was when any good Kanish family like his would have banished Kulya girls to the gooserun, be they never so

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beautiful—or perhaps honoured their beauty by gang-rape if there were half a dozen sufficiently drunken men about.

Now, regal in a gown of peach-coloured silk, a Kulya lady nightly shared his dinners, his heir fondly touching her goblet with his own to drink toast after toast to their three handsome boys asleep upstairs. With grandchildren growing apace, who should care when the blade of a harrow caught in the eye-socket of some mouldering skull? That war was over; the armistice continued.

Likewise in Teq they made a mock of "Lady Luck": her offering was a gobbet of spittle, launched at the floor when one of the company voiced hopes for some ambitious project.

Yet the rule bound him, and the traveller's nature was not such that he should complain. Forth he went on paths grown unfamiliar and spoke with many people in many places, as for example in Wocrahin, where once—

Memory! Memory! He had never foreseen that that intangible, binding the fluid nature of Eternity into the sequential tidiness of Time, would also hamper the will like age itself! Almost, he began to envy those who could die . . .

No matter. In Wocrahin a man sat gobbling lamprey-pie in a splendid banquet-hall: gross in a velvet doublet smeared with gravy-stains. Words chomped around a full mouth of the fish and crust, he forced out, " 'Fonly w'were freah y'muzzhr!"

"Ay!" sighed his wife, accustomed to interpreting such talk: she fat as a prize breeding-sow, though childless, her vast bosom exposed almost to the bulging nipples over a gown crusted with seed-pearls, her head seeming to be sunk into her neck by the weight of the gem-gaudy tiara she had put on, though they had no company to dinner apart from the thirty scrag-lean servants ranged around the hall.

"Would we were free of my mother!" she echoed when she had swilled her gullet with a swig of wine. "Ah, how we could live were we rid of her! She eats us out of house and home!"

"Sh'yeats zazouter *'ousernome!*" concurred the man.

The vast windows of the banquet-hall stood open to the warm summer night. Beyond them, watching the line of beggars who daily, more from habit than from optimism, came to beg the cook for scraps, the traveller in black both heard the exchange and also saw the lady's mother, in draggled rags, pleading with the beggars that if they were fortunate at the kitchen-door they should spare her a crumb or two.

He tapped his staff on the wall.

"As you wish, so be it," he said, and went away. The ceiling of the banquet-hall creaked behind him; it freed the greedy pair within a minute from all burdens, life itself not excluded.

Likewise in Medham, a city noted for its lovely girls, a man sat in a tavern who had tried over a score of them and recounted how expert he was in enjoying their favours.

"Ah, if I had a mug of ale for every

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one!" he hinted to his listeners, turning over his purse and finding it void of coin. "Why, did not the lady Fretcha come to me on hands and knees, saying I'd ruined her for life? Haw-haw! Begged me—on my oath, she literally *begged* me—to make an 'honest woman' of her! Haw-haw-haw! And then there was the lady Brismalet; she did the same—what impudence! And the lady Thespie, and then Padovine . . . Ho! As I say, did I but have a quart of ale for each—!"

"As you wish, so be it," said his neighbour, a person in black with an unusual staff, and rose. No one noticed him depart. All were too taken aback at the spectacle of the boastful young man, belly distended like a hogshead, vomiting disgustingly because he could not hold ale amounting to twenty-six quarts.

"You stupid brute!" cried a carter in a hamlet hard by Acromel, and lashed his horse across the hind-quarters with a steel-barbed whip. Violent though was the blow, it barely drew blood—he'd employed it so often, the horse's back and legs were cicatriced with impermeable scars. Nonetheless the poor beast whinnied and cringed. Therefore he beat it again, and harder still.

"Ho, that you were blessed with more sense!" he roared. "Would you could learn how not to spill my load crossing a rut!".

Still grumbling about the stupidity of the horse, he went to the back of the cart to retrieve the ill-stowed sack of grain which had dropped off.

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and the horse reared up, tipping the whole ton-weight of bags on the stooping carter. Then it chewed through the traces and took its leave, to enjoy lush upland grass and roam free.

"By your favour, sir," said a boy of ten or twelve years, hunting a hedgerow near the village Wyve, "are such plants poisonous or wholesome?"

Offering for inspection a glabrous brownish fungus.

"Wholesome," the traveller said. "They may be fried."

With a moue, the boy tossed the toadstool aside.

"Are you not glad to have found that it's edible?" said the traveller. "Are you not gathering food for tonight?"

"No, sir," the boy said. His voice and eyes were older than his years. "I seek poisons to give to my mother; she rules me unkindly and will not let me do whatever I like."

He sighed enormously. "Ah, that I knew what growths may be relied on to cause death!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and went on, leaving the boy weeping because he realised on the instant: no matter what diet is chosen by a man, sooner or later death ensues.

Thus, pretty much as might have been expected, the way of the traveller wound on, until that night which overtook him deeper than other nights on the flank of Rotten Tor, in which he discovered why the honest workingman from Gander's Well had carefully sought tinder to carry on a journey a mere hour's walk in length.

And why the tinder had to be of a

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tree which once had drunk a marvellous spring far underground.

And also one thing far more important: why, when all about him he saw the triumph of the homely commonplace virtues, the prevalence only of the everyday vices such as greed—earnest, if any were to be had, of the impending conclusion of his task—he first should learn the flavour of that bitter new edge acquired by apprehension, which turns it into something cruder.

Fear.

II

TRULY THIS was not like an ordinary night! Though she was wrapped in a good plaid shawl, and had moreover mittens to her hands, the woman was dismayed by the solidity of the blackness, by the chill that bit from it through garments never so well-woven, to the ultimate marrow. Behind her the child Nelva, whom she had not dared to leave at home, was too weary—or too cold—even to whimper.

At least, though, far ahead there gleamed one spark: the mark of her destination.

Though going back . . .

She shivered so violently her teeth chattered. It was something to be faced, the return, and couldn't be helped. Bowing her head, although there was no apparent wind, she clung to her daughter's hand and hurried on.

Lights gleamed, fantastical the length of the little shop. Whoever had suffered by the coming of these unseasonable black nights to the Cleftor Fells, it wasn't Master Buldebrime who owned the place. Lamps shone on the adze-shapen counter facing the door that admitted clients from the street, and on all the pale pine planks doing the duty of shelves which lined the room wherever there was solid wall. There was even a lit lamp hung on that other door, of boards nailed to a saltire frame, giving access to the living quarters of the house.

Certain of these lamps burned candles of good tallow, and more of rank stale fat. Some burned wicks floating on clear sweet oil, but those were few, and fewest of all that were alight this evening were the ones which fed on exotic aromatic distillations and dispersed into the air not only a luminance slightly tinged with sapphire-blue but also a sweet perfume. These last had reservoirs to match their content: fine-wrought in alabaster, amethyst and orichalcum.

Cold on the street it might be, but shutters had boarded in the shop's two streetward windows long before, so well sealed at their edges by strips of wetted leather that the air within was past being only warm. Now it was hot with all those flames entrapped by clear chimneys, or tinted globes, or shields of thin-pared horn. The delicate scent from the most costly of them faded into a stench of vaporised fat; on their rich diet, the flames looked almost starved.

Nonetheless, even now, their glimmering colours made the coarse roof of overarching beams look like a

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mine of dismal coal illumined unexpectedly by an irrupting river that had washed a shaft of sunlight underground and shown that there were also jewels in the rock.

On the counter a tall time-candle, bright red wax crossed at thumb-joint intervals by bands of black, told that the hours of trading for today were nearly done.

Abruptly and in unison the flames bowed, like heads of barley in a field assaulted by a storm, and in from the street came the woman, her clogs announcing her arrival on the flags of the floor. Forgetful on the instant of her weariness and chill, the toddler Nelva at her skirts exclaimed with ooh! and aah! at seeing this wonderland of coloured light. A rush of burnt-wax stink took to the outdoors like a dying man's gasp, and there was a cry from within: "All right, I'm coming!"

Snuffers in hand ready to douse the time-candle and the rest, the owner of the shop appeared in a tallow-stiff smock. Shaven, his red jowls glistened as though he sweated the very fabric of his wares. He was poised to fawn, expecting one of the gentry who came by ordinary to view his stocks late in the evening, they being readier than the common sort to brave the dark what with their covered carriages and palankeens.

But that lasted a mere eyeblink. Here was only some nondescript poor woman, likely hoping to trade some useless odds and ends against a lamp instead of purchasing it with honest money.

"What is it you want?" he demanded.

"What would I come here for but a lamp?" the woman snapped, and added from the corner of her mouth, "Be silent, Nelva!"

The little girl complied, but her eyes remained enormously round as she gazed from one to another of the shining lights.

"Here!" went on the woman, slapping coins on the counter. "Three good coppers, as you see—what's more the rims aren't clipped! We need a lamp to eat our supper by. The one we had is broke, and do I sit Nelva here close enough by the hearth to see by fire-flame smoke makes her weep and salts her food with tears. For the bairn's sake, give me the best you can."

She set her hands on her hips and stood back. Taking up the coins, the shopkeeper studied them. As claimed, they were properly round and gave back to the time-candle the proper reddish sheen. He bit one, shrugged, and turned to a shelf of his cheapest lamps.

"This is the best I can do," he said, selecting one. "Take it or leave it."

The woman looked it over cannily. She said, "But that's a short candle in it, that's been lit!"

"Then take a brand-new candle, and my blessings!" the shopkeeper snorted, catching one up at random from a stack and throwing the shortened one to be re-melted later. "For three coppers that's the most I can spare. And wouldn't part with so much but that yon's a pretty child." He eyed Nelva, leaning forward on the counter. "Hmm! Yes! In three-four years you should let me know again. I'll prentice her to the candle-making trade.

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There's men aplenty who'd wed a wife with such a profitable skill."

Wrapping the lamp in her shawl, the woman said harshly, "Thank you, but no, Master Buldebrime! We hear the tales of your apprentices, even out where we live by Rotten Tor. So you like little girls as well as boys?"

The shopkeeper's face darkened below the saddest ruby of any of his lamps.

"Get out!" he rasped, and made as though to hurl his bronze snuffers.

Though the hand which clutched the coins stayed safely resting on the counter.

Once more the flames quavered as, faced with the prospect of returning to that dreadful black and cold, the child objected to the notion of departure; shortly, however, her mother dragged her over the threshold and the door banged shut. Buldebrime remained for a long moment fuming as foully as his cheapest candles, then mastered his rage and went to bar the entrance. He made the rounds with his snuffers, and resorted at last to his cosy living-room, leaving the shop lit only—through its skylight—by the far-off gleam of four crucial conjunct planets wheeling downward from the zenithal line.

III

NOT RIGHT, the traveller decided—not right at all!

He stood and pondered on the flank of Rotten Tor, a louring crest so friable not even goats might climb it in safety, staring in what long familiarity assured him must be the direction of Cleftor Vale. Granted that that entire valley lay in the daytime shadow of the Heights, should it not now be lit at least by starshine? And, come to that, was not the moon inclining towards its full?

Yet here was such blackness as only a shout might penetrate—or a scream! Like the one which had just re-echoed to him, in two parts: beginning with the cry of a child, continuing in a tone louder, deeper, more heartfelt.

"Ho, that we were safe at home! Help, if there's anyone there!"

The traveller did not need to hide his smile; the blackness performed that function for him. Tapping his way with his staff, he skirted the brink of the rocky torrent which here assured the summertime vegetation of its moisture and was shortly heard approaching by the woman who had called out.

"Ah! Friend, whoever you may be!" She ran blindly to him and caught at his arm. "Save me and my daughter—take us in!"

"*I have no lodging hereabout,*" said the traveller. "But you do, surely."

"What?" The woman seemed bewildered; then, of a sudden, recovered herself. "Why, what a fool I must be!" She went forward, groping, and shortly was heard to knock her fists on resounding planks. "Home!" she cried. "Home! Oh, let us in!"

A door creaked on awkward hinges, and a gleam of firelight showed the outline of a cottage originally built of sturdy four-square logs and boards, that now was tilt-roofed and wore a melancholy garb of grey-green lichen. The little child ran forward and flung her arms about a man who rose from a

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trucklebed, discarding a blanket of threadbare woollen stuff, but could not speak in greeting for a cough which overcame him.

"My dear, you're safe!" he croaked when he recovered. "Oh, you should not have taken Nelva!"

"You were asleep," the woman said, embracing him. "And it's so rarely that you sleep quite sound . . .! Ah, but I'm forgetting! Yarn, this gentleman who stands at the door: he's my saviour!"

The traveller entered at her gesture and bent his head.

"I was almost lost," the woman babbled on. "It was so dark—!"

"But surely," Yarn began, and coughed again, and said a second time, "But surely you went to buy a lamp!"

"Indeed, indeed! To Master Buldebrime's—here, sir," she added to the stranger, bustling about as she spoke while the child Nelva sat down on the bed at her father's side, "do you make yourself comfortable, and welcome too! I'd have fallen in the gorge had you not chanced by! Excuse the sparseness of our hospitality, but if all's gone well we can offer a broth of greens, and maybe some bread, and—"

"But to buy a lamp, and come home in the dark!" Yarn got that out in a single breath, before hacking into coughs, again.

"Hah!" The woman stopped in the middle of the floor, where firelight showed her silhouette, and planted her hands on her hips. "When I get back to town, shall I ever give Buldebrime a tongue-lashing! That lamp! That lamp! Here!"

She produced it from the folds of her shawl. "Why, did I not light it to see the path by, returning here? And did it not in the same moment smoke over its chimney, blacker than a barn-door?"

She gestured violently at her husband with it.

"Your pardon, sir," she added to the traveller. "But to be without a lamp these nights is more than a body can bear. It's as though the very dark outside comes creeping in at the unstopped chinks of the wall, dulling the fire-glow! And, say all our neighbours, Goodie Blanchett and Goodie Howkle and the rest: go to Master Buldebrime, his lamps are best, we have our own and sit by night in their warm yellow shine . . ." As she talked, she was rubbing the smoked-over chimney-glass on her shawl. The logs on the hearth sputtered from damp in counterpoint to her speech.

"I'll light it again, to prove my word," she said, and bent to pick a pine-splinter from the fire.

"What's worst of all," she said as she carried the flame to the twisted wick, "he took coin from me for it—not a mere bucket of ewes'-milk, or some trifle we could spare! And it does this! Sir!"—rounding on the traveller—"do you not think it criminal, to take advantage of a poor soul thus?"

But the traveller was not paying attention. Gazing at the lamp-chimney, which as predicted was on the instant blearing over, he was uttering sad words within his head:

"Ah, Wolpec, Wolpec! Has it come to this?"

Once this pallid thing of grimy

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smoke had been an elemental he—even he—was sometimes compelled to consult. There were conditions attached to such inquiry, by which he—even he—was forced to abide. Here, now, on the chimney of a common lamp, there writhed blurred characters such as once had expressed transcendent truths . . . but who alive could certify the meaning of such messages? Those tongues had been forgotten everywhere!

Reacting to the concentration of his gaze, the woman ventured, "Sir, you're not by chance skilled in the repair of lamps . . .?"

Then, registering the fierceness of his expression, she fell into a puzzled silence.

Some of the old laws, it appeared, still stood, but the understructure of them must have cracked, as a building may retain its general shape yet lack huge plates of stucco from its facade and be unsafe to walk the stairways of. . . For this lamp was showing three truths in the ancient manner . . .

Of three, the first incomprehensible, in a form of writing that creatures not quite manlike had employed to record dealings in imponderables. It had been hazarded that the records concerned a trade in souls, but that was barely an approximation. In any case, being an invention of chaos, the symbols had any value anyone cared to assign them, and they were fading, and it was time to ask again.

"How do you come to this pass, Wolpec?"

Now, the one debatable, in a single hieroglyph such as might have been seen on the high pillars of Etnum-Yuzup before that metropolis dissolved into dust with thunderclaps. The Grand Five Weavers had grown self-indulgent, and no longer observed the instructions they had issued to themselves in the days of the foundation of their city. This one might be read plainly; the traveller, as so often before, read it.

I would cease.

Now for the final truth, the ineluctable . . . but the question must be aptly posed. Indeed, the traveller realised, it had better not be a question but a statement, a truth of similar import. Within his head he framed it: "I have many names, but a single nature."

The little elemental understood, and on the glass appeared the characters of a poem by Shen-i-ya Eng-t'an Zwu, who sat for a thousand years beneath an elm and none could tell whether he lived or died, so wholly was he attuned with the world around.

Smoke
fades into the air
is no more seen

The candle-dousing winds of ages seemed to sough in the chimney of the cottage.

"Sir!" the woman said anxiously, "I wish you'd not bother so much with a trifling problem!"

"Is it not in fact a great matter for you, lacking a lamp?" The traveller didn't raise his head.

The woman sighed. "Well, in a sense I must confess it is. For eating close by the fire, and breathing smoke, is hard on my man Yarn above all, what with his chest . . . I'd set my heart on having a good bright clear new lamp!"

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"As you wish," said the traveller, not without sorrow, "so be it."

He blew out the flame. When he cleaned the glass and lit it anew, it shed a grateful pure yellow light.

Wolpec was little and wise; candles had sufficed in which to pen him. Fegrim was vast, and underlay a mountain. But he had seen among the snag-toothed peaks of Kanish-Kulya how it slumbered now beneath a cap of white, where once it had spouted smoke a mile high. No ripples stirred the pool of Horimos, and after untold aeons the river Metamorphia had changed that nature it once had of changing things. Wives did their washing in the spring at Geirion, and the eldritch song that Jorkas used to sing was turned a lullaby with nonsense words to soothe asleep the happy babes in wicker cradles hung to nearby trees. Even the names of the greatest ones: Tuprid and Caschalanva, Quorril and Lry—were one to speak them, folk would answer, "Who?"

They had departed, to fret powerless among the stars, and sometimes hurl futile spears of flame across the night . . . at which sight lovers, hand-in-hand, would cry merrily, "Look, there's a star to wish on! Wish for early marriage and long happiness!" And kiss, and forget it in a moment.

Except here, and that was very strange. Disquieting! It was indeed as had been described to him: as though the black of the night could filter through the walls and dull the fire. Flames here were sullen red, and their heat was muted. This was not true of the new lamp, but there were reasons for that.

It would be politic, the traveller reasoned, to see the dawn.

Therefore, dissolving one of the forces that held prisoner the light-beams in his staff, he picked his way across the hut's floor silently, abandoning the thick warm fleece he'd been offered for a coverlet, and went into the last hour of the night. It was oppressive with mephitic stench, as though every home in the valley had kept a fire ablaze all night against the mantle of blackness, and all their smokes had come together in a foul miasma. Even the blade of light from his staff was foreshortened a pace or two ahead of his toes.

The trade of lamp-maker hereabout must be a profitable one!

What this blackness was not was easy to define. It was not smoke, although much was now mingled in it. It was not fog, clammy and opaque, yet cleanly, being drops of fine-divided water. It was not cloud, that is of the same substance. It was—well, it was the inverse of light.

When dawn came, belatedly by the traveller's calculation, it behaved moreover in a peculiar fashion. Rather than thinning and being dispelled, as night ought to be by the rising sun, it drew in on itself, laying bare yard by yard the countryside around, as though one could make thick black tar flow uphill. And uphill was its direction, out of the vale and towards the ragged pinnacles of Cleftor Heights. There, at some point almost beyond the

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traveller's range of vision, it gathered itself as it were into a ball, into a spiralling cone, into a wisp . . . and nothing.

Yet it had left, over every inch of ground where it had lain, a brooding aura of dismal foreboding.

Going by ordinary ways, he later came on some children turned out of the house to play, who were listlessly tossing pebbles at a target scratched on a tree-bole, and seemingly cared little whether they hit it or not; at least, none among them was keeping score.

"Who rules these lands?" the traveller inquired, and one of them answered:

"I think his name is Garch, sir. Would you that I go in and ask my mother? She would know."

"Thank you; the name's enough," the traveller said.

IV

AT THE FULL MOON Garch Thegn of Cleftor Heights held certain audiences that differed markedly from the common run of daily business. One day before the full, he spoke to no one, but locked himself away in private rooms; one day after, it was never sure—even to his chief counsellors and stewards—whether he would return to resume his normal court, in his great hall tiled with chrysoberyl slabs.

His was a domain discussed far and wide in this country; by all accounts, it was improbable. Though most of it was rocky and soil was thin, its kine were famed for their fatness and the richness of their milk. Though their roots were shallow, often planted in mere crevices, everywhere the hedges yielded nuts and fruit to be preserved by boiling down in honey. Though it was unpopulous, with villages few and far between, its folk were tall and strong and raised healthy children; what was more, garments reserved elsewhere to the grandest ladies might here be seen gracing a farmer's wife driving her trap to market, or her daughter on a high-day bound for the wife-taking dance. Velvet and suede, samite and purple plush, were donned as casually as homespun, and only on the fringes of the Garch estates—as, for example, nigh to Rotten Tor—did families lack for silver spoons and porcelain dishes to entertain company at table with.

Yet, with all this, the folk of the district were misliked. It was said they were overly cunning; it was said that doing business with one of them was like trying to stand an eel on its tail. It was further hinted that it was best not to let your daughter marry one, be he never so prosperous, for in a short while she'd forget her family, and become like her neighbours, purse-mouthed, hard-eyed, fond of coin.

Despite such talk, however, travellers came frequently to Garch's mansion, for purposes of trade. And, arriving typically in the second quarter of the moon, came visitors of a particular sort, who brought not goods but ideas, and treasures, and relics—it being at this specific time of the month that the thegn was readiest to receive them.

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Few, nonetheless, passed the fierce initial scrutiny of his counsellors; penalties for wasting the thegn's time were severe, and all supplicants for audience must be grilled beforehand by these three. Each morning they assembled in an anteroom, with a scribe and a paymaster carrying a chest of coins, and saw everyone who had come intending to trade. Often the business was quick and simple, because it concerned only conventional goods that might be swiftly bargained for, such as cloth, or unguents, or fine handicrafts. Similarly, persons came offering services, skill in carving or tailoring or cobbling, and these were permitted to undertake a trial venture for a small fixed fee, then engaged on contract if their talents proved adequate. One of this sort had once been Master Buldebrime, and now he supplied the lamps and candles for the mansion, toiling monthly up from the town with a selection of his best productions.

Sometimes, however, the business went slowly, and involved interrogation, and it was the hardiest and most venturesome of the visitors who endured this. A few such were on hand today.

These trusted counsellors were three, as aforesaid. In a high-backed chair of horsebones pinned with bronze and padded with bags of chicken-down, the old crone Roiga sat to the left. To the right sat Garch's sister, Lady Scail, on lacquered ivory made soft with inflated sheepskin. And in the centre, scorning luxury, presided one-eyed Runch on a common counting-house stool. He wore green; Roiga brown; the lady Scail, yellow. All else in the room was sterile grey.

"Admit the first," said Runch in a barking voice, and alert servants ushered in a man who wore the garb of the Shebyas, itinerant traders whose home on the Isle of Sheb had gone back to yellow jungle, no one was certain why. Doffing his cap, he placed before Runch an object in a small pink sack.

"Your honours, I bring a rare relic, from a city sunken in the depths of Lake Taxhling. Had I but the gold to finance such an expedition, I'd hire divers to go rake the bottom-mud and they'd produce beyond a peradventure many other potent articles!" He coughed behind his hand and dropped his voice. "Doubtless you're aware that knowledge of an extraordinary kind was available to the inhabitants of that city, which I need not name."

Runch looked over the relic, which was a corroded axe-blade. He said, pushing it aside, "You cannot name the city, because it isn't there. What you have is part of the cargo of a boat capsized by a storm. Go away."

"But, your honour—your grace—your highness . . .!" the man expostulated. The crone Roiga snapped bony fingers, and an attendant hurried him away.

"Next," she said in a voice like rustling dry leaves.

A man entered who swept the floor with a blue cloak as he bowed. "I, sir and ladies," he announced, "acquired a book at Pratchelberg. Lacking the skill to read the ancient language in which it's couched, I thought to bring

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it to your thegn, as being the most renowned, most expert, most—"

"Save your breath," murmured the lady Scail, having turned a mere half-dozen of the pages. "This text's corrupt, and anyhow we have a better copy."

Protesting quite as loudly as his forerunner, the man in the blue cloak made a forced departure. To the music of his wails, a third supplicant approached, offering a small furry ball.

"This unique article," he declared, "speaks when it's gently squeezed, crying out in agony. By repute it grew on the branches of Yorbeth, and I laid out half my life's savings on it."

Runch took it and listened to its cry. He said as he threw it aside again, "Hah! Yes, indeed, it does speak—by forcing air through twin taut reeds! And do you know what it says? It says, 'That man who bought me is a fool!' Get you gone!"

"Will they never learn?" murmured the lady Scail as this man also was frogmarched out. She had taken a tiny pad of emery and was buffing at a blood-red nail. "Who remains—anyone?"

"Spices," whispered a pale girl who entered next, wearing a broad hat, fur breeches and a black mail shirt. She laid a packet on the table and stood back.

The three counsellors briskened. "Ah!" said Runch, sniffing the aroma which exuded from the packet. "Vantcheen, yes?"

"And of good quality," confirmed Scail. "Name your pay."

"Silver. A hammer-head. Three ounces' weight."

"SHE LAID A PACKET ON THE TABLE AND STOOD BACK."

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The three counsellors tensed. Roiga said, "Not the shaft?"

"I thank you," the girl said, and curled back her lip to reveal a missing tooth. "But the shaft has already—ah—been given to me."

"You're skilled for your age!" exclaimed the crone.

"I thank you again," murmured the girl, and turned to go.

"Wait," invited Scail. "I think my brother the thegn would wish to speak with you! It's long since one came here who was so adept."

"I shall speak with him if the time comes," said the girl composedly, and took from the scribe a draft to cover her pay, authorising the mansion's master smith to forge the hammer-head.

There was a deep silence for some time following her departure. Her obvious youth, particularly, made her skills remarkable.

Especially if it had been purchased.

Then they were poised to adjourn for the day, the only other supplicants for audience being of the common run—disputants over a boundary-fence, or prospective parents-in-law come to determine the proper size of a marriage portion—when there was a furious stamping and considerable shouting beyond the door, and at the head of a gaggle of stewards, secretaries and waiting-maids, their master himself came blasting into the room.

They beheld his expression of blind rage with amazement, rising to their feet.

"I have been cheated and deceived!" roared Garch.

By ordinary he was pretty much a fop, this wealthy lord of improbably rich estates, but now his brown hair and beard were tousled, the laces hung down from his dark red shirt, and his fine worsted stockings slopped over the tops of his boots. To emphasise his outburst, he hammered on the table, and came near to knocking down the vantcheen spice.

"Search me this mansion, every nook and cranny!" he shouted. "Moreover, all the lands about! And if it be not found within the hour, send to find Buldebrime and bring him here!"

"If *what* be not found?" countered Scail, who as his sister might most freely of the three ask that simple necessary question without further inflaming him to rage.

Garch mastered himself with vast effort, drew close and whispered in her ear. By watching the change in her face, the base attendants from whom he meant to keep the detailed facts deduced at once it was a matter of grave import. Some among the best-informed put two and two together when they received their orders a moment later—to go forth and bring in all the lamps and candles that could be found—and not a few decided it was politic to go in search of service with some other lord.

It was, after all, a mere day and a half short of full moon.

By contrast with the thegn, Master Buldebrime was in a high good humour. Walking through the back rooms of his house, that also served as shop, factory and warehouse, he no more than cuffed any of his apprentices

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today, not once employing the tawse that hung at his belt for administration of severer punishments.

"Here are eleven candles almost the weight of twelve!" he barked at one child, charged with bearing finished work from the ranked pottery moulds to be checked at the steelyard. But even she and the boy who'd filled the moulds escaped with mere open-handed slaps. Satisfied that they were dutifully trimming the surplus wax to be re-melted, he continued.

"Not so much of that essence!" he growled at a boy engaged in adding perfumes, drop by drop, to a mix of oils for the most expensive lamps. "Don't you know it comes from Alpraphand? Hah, I've half a mind to make you walk such a distance on this floor, to brand on you knowledge of how far that is! Still, that would take you weeks, and I'll not feed and clothe you 'less you're working hard to pay for it!"

Accordingly that apprentice too got off with a smacking.

Persuaded at length that all was well below, as much as affected the making, storing and vending of his wares, he proceeded to the upper floor. This was partitioned into three large chambers. First he came into his own, luxurious, where a couch stood upholstered in deep warm bear-hide and a little girl was industriously polishing a pier-glass.

To her, he said nothing; to himself he murmured that it was a pity she was destined for the eventual requirements of Lord Garch. Otherwise . . .

But there must be no breath of scandal about this house! If there were, respectable folk would cease to apprentice their brats with him, who kept no wife nor even a serving-maid. For that reason, the two other rooms on this storey could be locked at night, and the keys remained always under his hand. One for the girls, one for the boys, they were in most regards identical, each containing heaps of rags soiled by long use and troughs into which at dawn and sunset he poured buckets of gruel for the apprentices to lap. Now and then he also gave them scraps of bacon and the outer leaves of cabbage: experience having shown that without a morsel of meat and a nibble of greens the children grew sickly—hence unprofitable. He begrudged the cost, but tolerated it.

One further door remained at this level, and he opened it with one of his many keys. Beyond was a steep flight of steps, hardly more than a slanted ladder, which he climbed. Despite the effort it cost to haul his bulk to the top, he was humming a cheery strain when he emerged into the attic that it led to: a large open space lighted by two dusty dormers, lately floored with well-planed boards that did not creak.

Below, although they continued with their work, the apprentices found time to whisper and make gestures with offensive import. One boy of fourteen, bolder than the rest and inured to being beaten, filched a more-than-finger-sized piece of wax and began to shape it into a human form. Pausing beside him, a girl who might have been pretty before a pint of Buldebrime's hot wax seared a puckered scar down her left cheek offered criticism and comment. Others

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gathered to see what was happening, and suggested improvements. In a little while, the likeness to their master was unmistakable, and they chuckled and clutched at one another in delight.

When the doll was complete, they hid it in a chink between the planks of the wall, to furnish further amusement at some other time.

Above, unaware of this, Buldebrime approached the centre of his attic room. There stood a stool and a table bearing a number of books bound in an unconventional kind of leather. Also there was a brazier, and a locked cabinet with carven doors hung from a mainpost of the roof. The lamp-maker opened this last, and removed from it a number of small articles: a bundle of feathers, a bag of herbs, and some powders.

Watching from deep shadow, the traveller in black repressed a sigh. He hated these hole-in-corner enchanters, not merely because they were victims of the same paradox as their distinguished predecessors—desiring to control chaos for the sake of the power to be had from it, yet anxious not to destroy it by exerting such control—but also because he'd found them ignorant, discourteous and casual. Buldebrime seemed typical of many.

He did not attempt to make himself known. Had Buldebrime been as adept as he presumably liked to think, he would not have needed to be told there was a presence in the room. He set out what was needful for the sorcery he intended to undertake bar one crucial item: a single candle. And then, in the instant before he discovered that the candle was not where he thought it was, there came a thunderous hammering from the entrance to the shop, followed by a loud cry.

"Buldebrime! Buldebrime! Open in the name of Garch Thegn of Cleftor Heights!"

The traveller gave a nod and took his leave.

V

THERE WAS a certain spot, a fair sward set with rocks, flat-topped as though designed express to be sat upon, commanding a fine view of the thegn's mansion and within lazy strolling distance of the villages nearest thereto. In any other community, it might safely have been predicted that on fine clear evenings such as this the local folk would often congregate here, bringing provender and beer and possibly a tabor and some fifes, to enjoy the pleasant outlook and reflect on their luck in serving so notably able a ruler.

Here, however, the safe prediction was that by late afternoon all who did not have utterly unavoidable business would have retreated to their homes, against the onset of that unnatural night which soaked up starlight and bit at the bones with vicious teeth.

So indeed the case proved. The last herds were driven back to their byres, the last flocks were folded, long before the sun had touched the divided peaks of the Cleft Tor. As the shadows lengthened, the air grew thick, the

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aura which had infected the whole day curdling into a foretaste of the dark to come.

Seated alongside a curving track, his staff across his knees, the traveller gazed towards the thegn's mansion. It was a handsome, if uninspired, edifice. Girdling it in the place of walls there were low-roofed outbuildings perhaps a hundred paces by two hundred, made of grey stone, interrupted by a gate and speckled with windows. These enclosed a courtyard above ground level, whose cobbled surface concealed subterranean dungeons and other hidden chambers, and in the centre of the yard upreared a tower, or rather frustum, its sloping sides approximating the base of a cone, containing the private quarters of the thegn. Terminating its truncated top, there was a winch-house where by shifts a score or so of muscular deaf-mutes waited the signal to save Garch the effort of climbing stairs, by hauling on ropes to lift a sort of palankeen steadied by greased poles and capable of being halted at any floor of the tower.

As the traveller studied this mansion, he saw servants come to set out torches by the gate, though there was still considerable sun-time left in the day.

Eventually there came in sight around the curve of the road a sort of small procession. It began with a striding man-at-arms, suspiciously staring this way and that. It continued with a personage in the garb of a Shebya: blue cap, green coat, black boots and silver spurs. He rode astride a palfrey. Then came a girl attired in pink as a page, but bosomed heavily enough for there to be small chance of error, leading the first of a pair of pack-mules whose wooden saddles were half-empty, and another man-at-arms leading the other. Such was a common spectacle in any well-governed land; the Shebyas were the greatest traders of the age, and travelled by ordinary in such little groups.

The leader of this party, however, was clearly not pleased with whatever business he'd most recently conducted. He frowned as he rode, and not infrequently uttered objurgations.

He redoubled them for fluency and loudness when, on spotting the black-clad figure by the track, the leading man-at-arms dropped his spear to an attack position and cried, "Halt!"—thereby almost spilling his employer from his steed.

"Good morrow," said the traveller mildly. "Sir, would you command your man to put up that over-eager blade? It's pointed at a very vital spot!"

"Do so," the Shebya said, and pulled a face. "Forgive him," he continued, doffing his cap. "But we're collectively upset, I'd have you know, and very edgy, as it were. We've done so poorly on our errand to this famous thegn, of which we had, I must admit, high hopes."

"The saddles of your mules seem light enough," the traveller murmured.

"Oh, ordinary pack-goods one can dispose of anywhere," the Shebya shrugged. "But . . . Well, sir, might I hazard a guess that you are bound to call on Garch?"

"That possibility," the traveller

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conceded, "should not be totally ruled out."

"I thought so!" the man exclaimed, leaning forward on his palfrey's withers. "And you travel light, I notice, and have no stock-in-trade apparent to ordinary view! Therefore I deduce you would welcome information concerning the thegn's alleged willingness to purchase—ah—intangibles, and other rare items, for a great price."

"It would be rash to deny," the traveller said, "that I've heard reference to that habit of his."

"Then, sir, save your trouble. Turn about, and escape the oncoming night—for, truly, the nights they have hereabout are not of the common cosy kind! The tales you've heard are arrant nonsense."

"Nonsense, you say?"

"Indeed!" The Shebya grew confidential, lowering his tone. "Why, did I not bring him an object virtually *beyond* price? And did I not in the upshot have to peddle it door to door, for use in some lousy household enchantment instead of in the grand ceremonials of an adept? That it should keep company with pollywogs and chicken-blood—faugh! I ask you! Should it not be dragon-spawn?"

"And was it efficacious?" the traveller said, hiding a smile.

The Shebya spread his hands. "Sir, that is not for me to determine. Suffice it to say that tomorrow will tell; accordingly, I propose to be some distance hence at that time!" His mask of annoyance gave place, willy-nilly, to a grin; it was granted by everyone that, rogues though the Shebyas might be, they were at least engaging rogues.

"Howbeit," he appended, "take my advice. Don't go to Garch expecting to sell him remarkable and unique artifacts or data. Apart from all else, the place is in a turmoil. Someone, so to speak, would appear to have laden the thegn's codpiece with live ants, and he gibbers like a man distraught, ordering all who displease him to be shortened by the head without appeal. Another excellent reason for departure—which, sir, if you will forgive the briefness of this conversation, we purpose to continue to accept."

After he and his companions had gone, the traveller remained. The air thickened still further. It felt almost resistant to the limbs, like milk turned with an admixture of rennet. Lost on a high outcrop, a kid bleated hopelessly for its nanny. Chill that one might have mistaken for agonising frost laid a tight hold on the land, yet no pools crisped with ice. The traveller frowned, and waited longer still.

Over the high tower of the mansion, at long last, the coffin black of full night started to appear: solid-seeming blotches on the sky. At roughly the same time, there were noises to be heard along the road again, coming from the direction opposite to that which the Shebya had taken. Into sight came a party of hurrying men on horseback, full-armed, glancing apprehensively at the gathering dark. Some had equipped themselves with torches, and kept making motions towards their flint and steel.

In their midst, tied face to tail on a

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dirty donkey, was Buldebrime moaning and crying out, hands lashed at his back and his grease-stiff smock badly torn.

Some distance behind, unable to keep pace, a furious driver cursed a pair of shaggy-fetlocked horses drawing a cart loaded until the springs sagged with candles, lamps, and articles in bags which could not clearly be discerned.

Of itself, the parade might have been amusing. Given the circumstances which had led to it, the traveller could not find it other than appalling.

The darkness spread, and yet it did not move. Rather, it occurred, moment by moment, at places further from its source.

VI

"BE CALM!" Lady Scail for the latest of countless times adjured her brother.

"Be calm?" he echoed, mocking her. "How can I be? Are they not deserting us, the traitors? Deserting *me*, who gave them prosperity from this lean harsh land, made them the envy of folk in richer parts?"

It was true: news came every few minutes of some trusted serving-man, soldier or steward who had surreptitiously crept away from the household.

"Is it not, moreover," he pursued, "the night before full moon? Is it not nearing midnight of that night? Must I not shortly go into the prescribed retreat? And how can we tell as yet whether we were deceived by Buldebrime? Perhaps he miscalibrated our time-candles, so we'd have no means to tell the proper hour!"

Admittedly, it was impossible to make astronomic observations under a night as blank as these.

Nonetheless she blasted the same injunction at him, saying, "You fool, you have to keep your head at any cost! How many enchanters have not gone to doom because an elemental took advantage of just that weakness in their character?"

Sweating, gulping draught after draught of wine to lend him courage, he did his best to comply, since reason was on her side. However, self-mastery was hard. The mansion, and not only that but the entire surrounding countryside, was aquiver. The jagged range of Cleftor Heights was thrumming to a soundless vibration of menace, as though one of the beings incarcerated in a restless star had found a means to transmit terror down a shaft of light and struck the bedrock into resonating the keynote of a symphony of disaster, against the advent of the instrumentalists.

Moreover, it is not good for one who invokes the forces of chaos to pay any attention whatsoever to reason . . .

"Where's Roiga?" Garch demanded of a sudden.

"Where she should be: making ready in your room."

"And Runch?"

"They called him to the gate a while ago. They've sighted the party bringing Buldebrime."

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"Then I'll go down to the dungeons," Garch declared, and drained his goblet. "I must be first to learn what that traitor's done!"

There was routine in this mansion, as in any great lord's house, and to outward appearance it was being maintained. At the corner of two echoing corridors the traveller in black saw proof of this. Thump-thump down the passages to the beat of drums there came the nightly provisions for the company at dinner: pies stuffed with game so heavy two men staggered under the load, and whole roasted haunches of oxen and sheep; then serving-girls with jugs of wine and beer, and butlers carrying fine white linen napkins on their arms, and boys with ewers and basins of scented water, for washing hands, and harpists and flautists and a dwarf. This last hobbled awkwardly in an overlong gown, designed to make him trip on its hem for the company's amusement.

One could not intelligently foresee there being much laughter in the banquet-hall tonight. The stones from which the building was erected shared the incipient convulsions of the landscape, and over-much dust danced in the light of the torches.

Intermittently, from beneath, there issued screams.

Orderly, with professional precision, the least-spoken-of among Garch's retainers—Tradesman Humblenode, the torturer—had set out the varied equipment for his task: here whips and fetters, thumbscrews there; tongs, knives and nooses at another place, and in the centre of all a brazier, at which a little dirty boy worked a blacksmith's bellows in a vain attempt to make it burn as bright as was required. Even here under the courtyard, where the walls oozed continual damp, the pervasive obliterating light-absorption of the strange night made itself known.

At the mere sight of the implements Buldebrime had collapsed into snivelling, and it was long after the thegn's intrusion to his cell that they made him utter coherent words.

"No, I did not filch any such candle! I have no knowledge of enchantment!"

"Try him with a little red iron," Garch proposed, and Tradesman Humblenode set his tools to the heat.

"Have pity, have pity!" Buldebrime cried. "I swear by Orgimos and Phorophos, by Aldegund and Patrapaz and Dencycon—!"

"I thought you had no knowledge of enchantment?" Garch murmured, and gestured for Humblenode's assistants to stretch the lamp-maker tight across a rack.

But in a short space from the application of the first iron he escaped into unconsciousness, and not all Humblenode's art sufficed to awake him.

"Is Roiga meantime testing the lamps and candles that were brought with him?" Garch remembered to ask, somewhat belatedly. He had given the instruction, and not checked that it was carried out.

"I come from her, sir," a nervous waiting-maid reported, who was trying not to look at the limp body of Buldebrime, or anything else present in the cell. "She assures me she has

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tested every one, and whatever you seek—uh—isn't there."

Garch drew himself up to his full height. "So the treacherous lamp-man has tricked me," he muttered. "Can he not be aroused by midnight?"

"By no art known to me," said Humblenode apologetically. It was the first time he had failed his master, and he braced himself as though to face his own treatment in consequence.

But Garch swung on his heel and strode away.

He came upon his sister, together with Runch and attendants, at the head of the dank noisome stairway to the dungeons; his private means of vertical transport did not, for logical reasons, extend into this level.

"Have you succeeded?" Scail cried.

"Failed!"

"And midnight nears!" Runch muttered.

"What must be done, must be done," said Garch. "Prepare me for my watch alone."

"But surely it was tonight you planned to conjure Wolpec, and ask his earnest of your ultimate success!" Under her face-mantling layers of rouge and powder, the lady Scail turned white.

"What's to be done will be done now," Garch snapped. "Like it or not! You have tomorrow's daylight to run away, if that's your plan. For the moment, leave me—time is short."

Without so much as a brotherly embrace, let alone that other kind which had in the past lent certain crucial forces to his doings, he pushed past them both and was gone.

Under the supervision of the crone Roiga, servants had toiled to bring many articles into the room she was making ready. It lacked windows, naturally; what air there was must seep through tiny crevices, and about each, carefully marked, there had been inscribed a line of minuscule writing in an obsolete syllabary. It lacked ordinary furniture, too; in place of that it was hung with curtains of goat-hide, woven marsh-grass and the plaited hair of murdered girls. There was a mirror in the centre of its floor, which was as true a circle as the mason's art could contrive, but that mirror was cracked across, and the traveller knew with what hammer the blow would have been struck: silver-headed, shafted with a length of gristle whose loss a man, albeit briefly, would have lived to regret. He had been aware that enchantments of this calibre were still conducted, but of all the necessary preliminaries to them one appeared to have been totally forgotten.

Patience.

Rat's-bane and wolf-hemp; powder of dragon-bone and mullet-roe; candied mallow and murex pigment . . . Yes, all the ancient indispensables were here. Bar one. Bar the one that mattered more than anything.

The traveller withdrew into dismal contemplation, sure now what ceremonies were afoot.

Then, finally, Garch came, pale and trembling but determined not to let his companions recognise the full depth of his terror, to perform rites required of him as lord of this land which yielded

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more than its share of good things. He was correctly robed in a chasuble of blood-hue; he correctly wore one shoe of hide and one of cloth; he correctly bore the wand, the orb and sash; and the proper symbols, though awkwardly, had been inscribed on his palms with henna and indigo.

He entered the door of ashwood clamped with brass and it was closed at his back with the traditional braided withes: one at the height of his neck, one at the height of his heart, and one at the height of his crotch. That done, Roiga and Runch and Scail perforce withdrew. Unless they chose to run away, indeed, by tomorrow's daylight, the process was in train and they were to be dragged along with it.

Even running away might well not help.

As for the traveller in black, he had no choice. This was intrinsically a part of that which bound him. From this moment forward, he was compelled to remain. Here was no petty hearthside conjuration, to be laughed at when it failed and probably neglected thereafter; here was no witty tampering with the course of natural events, such as certain happy enchanters had counted a fair reward for the relief of boredom; here was no ritual with overt profit, such as the merchant enchanters of a bygone age had employed to make their cities and their retainers flourish.

No: trivialities could be ignored. Here was a ceremony so elaborate, so pregnant with possibility and so absolutely devoid of *probability* that its very name, regardless of what language it was uttered in, sent shivers down the spines of uncomprehending listeners. Here, set on foot in a selfish lordling's mansion, was such a pattern as had not been contrived since the epoch of the Grand Five Weavers and the Notorious Magisters of Alken Cromlech: the most ancient, the most arcane, the most honourable appellation of the One Who . . .

The traveller froze the progress of his mind. Almost, he had recited the full title to himself. And were he to do so, all—all—everything would eternally be lost!

If it were not already lost. He feared it was.

VII

THE LADY Scail slept but ill that night, and when her shoulder was gently touched by the waiting-maid who attended in her chamber, she rolled her face fretfully back into her satin pillows.

"Fool!" she snapped. "I said to waken me at dawn. Now it's still full dark."

Indeed, across the windows a pall of utter lightlessness remained.

"But, madam," whispered the poor girl, "according to our time-candles dawn should have befallen an hour ago. Yet the sky remains like pitch!"

Lady Scail sat up on the instant. Through the opened shutters she saw the truth of the maid's assertion. Rising from her night-couch, she exclaimed in

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wonder.

"Why—why, that bodes success, after all! Here, girl, go rouse me Runch and Roiga from their beds, and bid them wait on me at once!"

Unprecedentedly, without waiting to be handed her daytime garments, she threw aside her sleeping-gown and struggled of herself into a used chemise.

Similarly awakened, Roiga trembled with delight and anticipation. She had spent weary decades pent in this worn-out body, with her knees cracking from the rheumatism and her eyes returning blurred images of the outer world. Now under her shrivelled bosom her heart beat hammer-wise, at the impending prospect of repurchased youth.

It was the same for one-eyed Runch: still a mighty man to outward view, scorning the luxury of his companions and affecting the disciplined, hardy habits of a soldier accustomed to sleeping in fields and marching all day through sleet and hail. Thus he reposed at night on a simple bed of boards with one blanket.

But over the past few years he had more and more often failed to pleasure the girls he summoned to his couch, until at length he had been unable to endure further humiliation, and slept alone.

The promise of being able to rectify that . . .!

These three, however—and perhaps Garch himself, but none could be certain what was transpiring in his locked room—were the only persons in the whole of the Cleftor lands who found any semblance of joy in the advent of this amazing and unprecedented . . . day? Well, "day" it should indeed have been by rights, and everywhere there should have been the normal daily bustle: the younger children playing by the doorway, the older dispatched to their dame-schools with their slates and pencils; farmers bound to market hauling their travoises laden with cheese and bacon, their wives plucking geese or hunting eggs . . .

But over the country from Deldale to Herman's Wynd, and back again from Contrescarp to the Ten Leagues' Stone, at Poultry Rock and Brown Hamlet and Legge, at Yammerdale and Gallowtree and Chade, at Swansbroom and Swingthrimble and Slowge, it was dark until what should have been high noon.

And when the light eventually came, it was the wrong sort of light. It was the sickly greyish glow of chaos, that bleached all colour into the dullness of ash.

Now the mountains showed deformed, like mutant fungi; now the trees, vaguely visible, stood rigid as parodies in a picture. Watching the changing sky in high delight from the vantage of the tower's solar, Roiga and Scail and Runch shouted in succession for the best wine, the richest mead, the finest delicacies, that the stores could offer, by way of celebrating the approach of their triumph. The blackness of night and morning had retreated to the fringes of the Cleftor domain, and now it was as though a

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tunnel had been opened, vertically to the frontiers of the sky, for the beings from beyond to make a grand re-entry to their former state.

But the serving-maids gawped and gaped and rubbed their ears as they came and went, and there was a stale taste in all mouths and a dragging heaviness oppressed all bodies. Only the frenetic counsellors ignored it, and drank toast after toast to the wonderful skills of Garch.

It was not until they were three parts drunken that they realised there was another in the solar apart from those servants they had bidden to attend them.

"Who's that?" cried Scail, and slopped wine down her dress in turning to look over her shoulder.

"Oh—oh!" moaned Roiga, and would have shrunk into hiding.

"Declare yourself!" shouted Runch, rising and drawing the sword he always wore.

"Here I am," the person said, garbed in black and walking forward with his staff. "Put up that blade—it's no protection against what's coming to you."

Runch hesitated, and the sword-point presented to the stranger's chest wavered back and forth. He said, "Who . . .?"

"One who has many names and a single nature."

They were thunderstruck on the instant. Dropping her mug of wine, Scail whimpered, "But I thought—"

"Did you?" the traveller sighed. "Yes, I imagine you must have. And your brother likewise. Else you'd have buckled to like sensible folk, and taken what was to hand, and made the most of it. Instead of which . . . Do you know who awaits admission to this place?"

Uncertain, but feigning bravado out of shame at her spasm of cowardice, Roiga said bluffly, "Why, of course. Have we not agreed to call on Tuprid?"

"Tuprid, who takes pleasure only in destruction, whom I saw snuff a star as men would snuff a candle, that he might witness the dying agony of the creatures on its planets as they froze into everlasting ice. And who else?"

"Why, Caschalanva, of course!" Runch exclaimed.

"He who prefers the fire," the traveller said. "They're ancient rivals. Each struggles to outdo the other in causing pain. And with them?"

"Quorril!" said Scail, and began to sound a fraction nervous, which was a belated sign indeed.

"Whose diet is souls," said the traveller. "And Lry?"

They all three nodded.

"To whom," he concluded, "love is hate—who breeds discord and warfare like the plague. And you believe these to be the only ones your brother has invoked?"

There was a second of silence. "It was all we agreed he should invoke," Scail said at length. "It's with them that we struck our bargain."

"Bargain!" The traveller gave a sad laugh.

"Why, certainly! Do they not owe us pay, for opening the way back to where they once ruled?" She was on her feet, facing him defiantly. "Should they not be grateful?"

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"Yes! Will they not give me back my manhood?" Runch demanded. And—

"Will they not give me back my youth?" shouted Roiga.

At the same moment there was a shifting underfoot, as though the land had taken on a colossal weight, and their dialogue with the traveller was forgotten. They rushed to the windows and peered out, this way and that, striving to catch a glimpse of whatever had descended to the earth.

"Oh, my wonderful brother!" Scail cried. "Had I but the *half* of his skills!"

"Well, well!" the traveller said, and then again: "Well, *well!* As you wish, so be it."

None of them heard him. Nor the later whisper that echoed from the stone walls following his departure, which sounded a little like:

"Now why did *I* never think of that?"

VIII

THIS, THEREFORE, was the manner of the coming back of the former great ones to the world. And it was not entirely to their liking.

Left alone in the stock-depleted house of Buldebrime, the gaggle of apprentices had at first been worried and afraid; then the boy of fourteen who had conceived the notion of making that mocking doll sought to calm the youngest of his companions by producing it again, and they dissolved into laughter as he put it through absurd motions by heating it so the limbs could be deformed. Laughter made them grow bolder, and recalled them to routine. They fed themselves, and then since their master was not present to forbid them they made free of the house, tumbling together in many enjoyable games until sleep overtook them.

On the morrow, however, they were frightened by the curious unprecedented length of the darkness that enveloped the neighborhood, and moreover they were hungry, because they had eaten their fill last night from the supplies in the pantry—the first time in years, for some of them. So nothing was left. They hunted high and low by the wan light of such candles as they had managed to make for themselves after Buldebrime's stock had been confiscated by Garch's men, and ultimately found a way to prise off the padlock blocking their access to the attic room. In the company of the girl with the scarred face, the boy braved the ladder-like steps and looked around the shadowed books and mystic articles in amazement.

"Would I knew what all these things were for, and could employ them!" the girl said.

The traveller spoke soft words, unnoticed, in a corner.

In the increasing chill of their hut by Rotten Tor, little Nelva and her mother listened in agony to the racking coughs the cold afflicted Yarn with.

"Oh, mother!" the bairn cried, seeing how the fire faded and gave no heat. "Would I knew what that nice man in black did, to make the lamp burn brightly! Then I'd do it to the

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logs, and we'd all be warm!"

The traveller again spoke unheard words, and went his way.

Trapped by the incredible darkness in a very bad inn, the Shebya trader scratched flea-bites and wrangled with the landlord, claiming that anyone who offered such miserable beds and such foul beer had no right to the regular score from his clients. At length, losing temper, he shouted at the man.

"Ho, that I knew a way to rid this land of such greed, which makes one's stomach turn with fury! Ho, that I dealt here only with honest fellows like myself, with codes and principles and strict adherence to a bargain!"

He was exaggerating just a little; nonetheless, the Shebyas were frank as all agreed, though a hint of sleight-of-mind might sometimes give them the better of a deal with anybody less subtle.

Chuckling, the traveller spoke and tapped his staff on the wall.

He wondered how it was faring with Garch Thegn of Cleftor Heights!

And the answer, framed in brief, was—not so well.

Back to him came the powers to which he'd bowed, weary of long conjurations, but content, all having said as they descended to him, "We'll go see first how well you've kept your word, and then we'll speak of bargaining again!"

So into the nervous night, bleareyed, he waited on their presence, and ultimately at the moment which—said a well-measured time-candle, and no visible stars—corresponded with the second of full moon, he rose expectantly from his discomfortable posture on the floor in the middle of his cracked mirror.

One came, and only one, and in such rage as made the walls shake and the tower-top tremble. And reached out for Garch, and he was not.

Because . . .

That elemental, Tuprid, who'd snuffed stars, had gone to see first of the places in his allegedly regained domain the nearest to a star, a place of light: a candle-maker's shop. And there had found awaiting him a skilful girl, scar-faced, with a boy beside her who clutched her hand and loaned her courage, chanting at a candle they had brought and making it burn against the fiercest orders of the visitor. Below, the other children cried, and she thought of them, and made her efforts double, and in the upshot melted that maker of great darkness into shapeless wax, dribbling across a book bound in human skin.

After that, very suddenly, the stars could be viewed by the skylight.

Also the elemental Caschalanva, who preferred the taste of fire to that of ice, had gone down by the bitter vales near Rotten Tor, and passing a hut had been trapped by a little child, who wished the logs on the hearth would burn more bright . . .

And in an inn where fleas plagued the customers, the being Lry that fostered dissension found a liking for greed that was dissipating from the

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spot with such force as gales have, using a mountain-range for organ-pipes. Greed was among the chiefest of his tools; therefore he grasped at it—and was swept into nowhere on the instant.

Whereupon, learning of the fate of his companions that were a good deal more than mere companions, Quorril returned to say that they were cheated, and—souls being his diet—took Garch's with a slash of an immaterial claw that laid wide-open the wall of his secret room, emitting fumes. The high tower of the mansion tumbled down, its foundations being ripped away.

Among the ruins, with her dying breath, the lady Scail called after him, and she being now dowered with the half of her brother's skills which concerned the binding, rather than the releasing, of elementals, he ceased his flight back to the sky, and perforce returned to join her, Roiga and Runch, buried beneath the stack of masonry.

"Where let him rest," the traveller said contentedly, having viewed all this from the vantage of the same sward where he'd met the Shebya.

"And Buldebrime, and Tradesman Humblenode," a quiet voice confirmed alongside him. He had not expected to be alone; he did not look around.

"And sundry innocents, Highness," he appended. "Yet not so innocent, come to think of it. Willing, for instance, to serve a lord whose power was drawn from chaos, when they should have known that no mortal force could make this barren land so wealthy. Equally, prepared to apprentice their children to masters who starved and beat them, for the sake of having them learn a profitable trade . . ."

He shrugged, both hands clasping his staff. "Besides," he concluded, "has it not come to a very tidy end?"

There was a silence. Also it was dark here. But it was the regular honest dark of a spring night around moonset, nothing worse.

"An end," the quiet voice said meditatively. "Yes, perhaps it is an end. It might as well be . . . You know, my friend, there's something very curious!"

"Tell me," the traveller invited.

"Of all the qualities I endowed you with, the most potent has proved to be a certain witty elegance. A—a neatness. A sense of practical economy!"

"I've fostered it," the traveller agreed. "Having but one nature, I must needs make the most of what I owned." He gestured with his staff at the barely-seen view. "Besides, was it not that practical way of thinking which reduced the modes of access for the ancient ones to these few should-be-barren acres?"

There was no answer. After a pause, he added, "I'm sorry. You must be feeling grievous loss."

"I?" Beside him, the One Who had assigned him to his errands, come to witness this last confrontation in the guise of a tall pale girl, shook back long locks under a wide-brimmed hat. "Loss of the other natures that were mine? Why, not at all! Somewhat to my astonishment . . ."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 128)

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Shortly after the Clarion Workshop concluded this year, Harlan Ellison called me up and said, "There's this writer who was at Clarion this year, Ted—his name is Piglet, and you've got to buy his stuff!" Two days later, Gerard Conway brought over a quiet young man who had a story he wanted to show me. His name was Geo. Alec Effinger, and the byline he'd crossed off the story was "Piglet." While I believe this will be his first published story, I'm confident you'll be seeing a good deal more of him, both here and elsewhere, in the very near future . . .

THE EIGHT THIRTY TO NINE SLOT

ALEX EFFINGER

Illustrated by STEVE HARPER

WELL, good morning!

It certainly *is* a good morning, isn't it? It is a lovely morning, and you most certainly shouldn't be inside watching television. When our program is over, why don't you ask mommy if she'll let you go outside to play? God knows you don't have forever. These beautiful days won't last forever.

I'm Cowboy Tom, and welcome to the Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck Cartoon Show. We're here every day . . .

Every day.

Before we get to the cartoon portion of today's show, kids, I'd like to say a few words about the boys and girls who appear with us each day. They are all nice boys and girls, just like the children you know at school and in church. They all have an interesting story to tell us, too, about their home, their mommy and daddy, or about the things that they like to do. I suppose you think you have something interesting to tell us, too. In that case, don't tell your mommy! Let it be a surprise. Tell your teacher at school or the priest in Sunday School. They will tell me and then you can be here with us on the Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck Show. Like little Bobby here.

Hello, Bobby, how are you? Say hello to all the boys and girls at home. Do you like it here with us today?

Bobby's parents are dope addicts, isn't that right, Bobby? Now, there isn't anything wrong with dope addicts, is there? I'm sure the teachers in school and the priests in your church have told you many times that you shouldn't laugh at dope addicts, or throw stones through their windows. They are people, too, and their children are nice little boys and girls, just like Bobby here. I'm sure Bobby has many interesting things to tell us about his home, and about his mommy

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and daddy. Who do you like better, Bobby, your mommy or your daddy?

That's nice, Bobby. I like my mommy, too. What do you like best about your mommy?

Ha, ha, ha. Bobby, that's just darling. What does your mommy like best about you?

Ha, ha, ha.

Bobby, why don't you like your daddy as well?

Does he do it more than your mommy?

What does your daddy do to pay for all the dope?

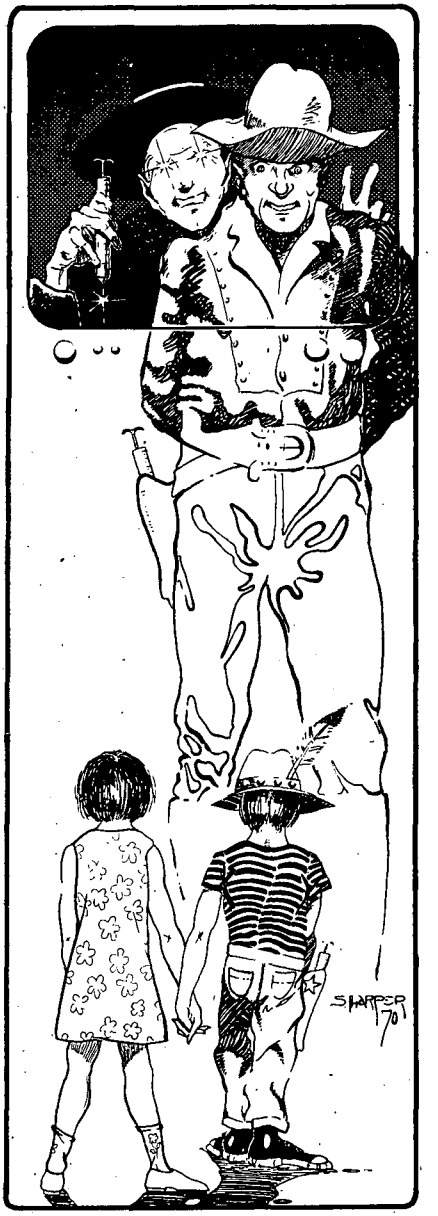
What do your mommy and daddy think about your teacher in school?

Do they take you to all the funny meetings?

Bobby, you've been very nice to visit with here on the Cowboy Tom Show. We've talked with you for a while, but I'm sure that all the boys and girls at home are waiting for their first cartoon, so we're going to give you a real great prize. We're going to give you this beautiful Junior Service Station Outfit, made by the Paragon Synthetics people of Akron, Ohio. It comes complete with miniature bunks and racks, and twelve lifelike miniature dope addicts, which can be bent into many, many realistic positions. Also included in this Junior set are two harmless plastic syringes and a supply of non-toxic saline solution so all the boys and girls on your block can come and play Service Station at your home. All you have to do is pass our little test.

Ranger Chuck, do you have the test bottle?

Thank you, Ranger Chuck. Bobby, and boys and girls at home, you've probably seen a bottle like this on your



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teacher's desk at school, or in the priest's office in church. I'm going to open this little glass top, just like this. Now step over here, Bobby, and hold very still while I put some of this liquid into your eyes.

Oh, now you see, boys and girls, Bobby hasn't been listening either to his teacher in school or to the priest at his church. He is crying and screaming. I'm afraid we can't give the lovely Service Station Outfit to someone who cries, Bobby. I'm sorry, but maybe we'll give it to someone else later in the show.

Ranger Chuck, take Bobby to the Dressing Room.

Now, boys and girls, what I have in this bottle is something that looks like water, but surely doesn't smell like water. It is called Ammonium Hydroxide. Look down here on your TV screen; the words "Ammonium Hydroxide" should be written across here. Ammonium Hydroxide is the same liquid that is in the bottles on your teacher's desk at school and in your priest's office in church. If you are good boys and girls you will never have to smell or feel it; but if your teacher or your priest thinks that you have been bad, they will give you the test, just like you saw me give to Bobby a few minutes ago. Lying or stealing is bad, as you have been taught; but worst of all is crying. If you cry, like Bobby, your teacher or your priest will send you to the Dressing Room.

Okay, kids. Let's all close our eyes and pray. Let's pray real hard, and maybe Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck will let you see a cartoon.

(A cartoon is shown, in which a group of little mice maul a large and somewhat stupid cat, but get eaten in the end. When the cat's away, the mice will play, but the cat won't be away forever.)

Wow, gang, wasn't that terrific? That was real great. Now, why don't we all close our eyes and pray; give thanks to Ranger Chuck and me for showing that wonderful cartoon. I hope you paid close attention to it, because your teacher in school and your priest in church will talk about it tomorrow.

Now I'd like all of you boys and girls at home to meet Marcie. Marcie is our little guest from far away. She lives in another country, very far away but still very much like our country. Marcie, your mommy is a dope addict, too, isn't she?

How does your daddy pay for all the dope your mommy uses, Marcie?

Oh, that's sad. I'm sorry about that, Marcie. Isn't that too bad, kids? Well, Marcie, how does your mommy pay for all the dope she uses?

Do all those men, your "uncles", do they give you money, too?

Marcie, do you want to be a dope addict when you grow up?

Golly, Marcie, that's too bad. I'm sorry that you don't want to be a dope addict just like your mother, because Ranger Chuck and I try to make the best dope in the world. We sell it to your mommy because we know she likes it, and we don't want her to have to buy bad dope from crooks and gangsters. Dope addicts sometimes act funny, but that's because they feel so good, or because they want to feel good. There's nothing wrong with that.

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Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck want all of you to feel good for the rest of your lives. We hope that when the teacher in your school or the priest in church tells you about dope, you will listen hard and try some. People who tell you not to are just trying to get it all for themselves. You probably know selfish boys and girls like that in school or in church. You should always tell your teacher or your priest about them; because then everybody can be happy again.

Well, Marcie, I'm sure that your teacher and your priest think that you're still too young to try dope, but here on the Cowboy Tom Show we're going to let you do just that, just as a "Hello!" gift for visiting our country, and for stopping by here today to tell us all about it. Just go with Ranger Chuck there, he'll take you backstage and show you all about how to give yourself dope. We also have for you a lovely twenty-four carat gold-filled medallion of St. Theresa of the Poppies that you can wear wherever you go. We hope you'll be happy; we hope you'll be happy as long as you live.

Wasn't she nice, boys and girls? And, think, you'll probably never ever see her again, but she'll be happy, sitting in her home far, far away. One of these days you'll be happy all the time, too, and that is because Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck are working so hard to see that you can have all the dope you need. You do everything your mommy and daddy tell you because you know that is right. Your mommy and daddy do everything that your teacher at school and the priest in church tell them to do, because they know *that* is right. And your teacher and your priest do everything that Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck tell them, because they know that we just want everyone to be happy.

I think it is time for our second cartoon now, boys and girls. If you really want to see a cartoon, get down on your knees, now. Pray hard, boys and girls; pray hard and Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck will hear you, just the way we hear what your mommy and daddy say at supper.

(Another cartoon is run. This one is about the monsters and the beatniks who tried to put a bell on the tail of the Eagle. It is just like the cat and mouse cartoon, at the end the Eagle chases the monsters and the beatniks back into the sewers.)

Now wasn't that a fantastic cartoon, boys and girls? If you really liked it, if you really want to see another, pray, boys and girls, let your mommy and daddy hear you, shout out your thanks.

We have a special surprise for you now, boys and girls. This is an animal. I know that many of you have never seen an animal in real life before. This is because Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck have put all the animals away where they'll be safe, just like your mommy and daddy put you away when their friends come over. Cowboy Tom and Ranger Chuck want all the animals in the world to be happy, too; you know that there are lots and lots of boys and girls in school and in church that want to hurt you, and you are their friends. Just pretend how many people there are who want to do bad things with animals, who can't even talk to them. We want the animals to be safe,

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but to keep them safe they have to be put far away. But today we have brought one of the animals to the show just for you. This animal is called a bird.

Our little friend, Cleo, wants to meet the bird, don't you, Cleo? Don't be afraid, birds can't hurt you. This bird is also a dope addict, and he's very happy right now. Come up here, Cleo. Maybe we can get the bird to say something.

Perhaps your teacher at school or the priest in your church has shown you pictures of other birds. They used to fly in the air, they are very pretty. They lived in trees, just like the trees that used to be on your street. Here, Cleo. Take this cracker. Maybe the bird is hungry; see if he wants the cracker. Be careful, though. He can't tell which is your finger and which is the cracker.

No, see, he doesn't want a cracker. But he's a nice bird, isn't he, Cleo? Isn't he, boys and girls? Ranger Chuck, take this nice bird to the Dressing Room.

Cleo, did you like the bird? Did *you* like the bird, boys and girls? You kids at home have probably noticed that Cleo is different than most of your friends in school or in church. Cleo is what we used to call a person of color. How does it feel to have skin that's all different than ours, Cleo?

You know, Cleo, you are very special. There aren't very many people like you anymore. Did you ever see your mommy and daddy?

That's sad, isn't it, boys and girls? Cleo has never seen her mommy and daddy. You can pretend what it would be like to never see your mommy and daddy again. Wouldn't you be lonely? Cleo's sort of people were very different in their ways than we. They were really nice people, but they never wanted to do any work. They were very good at music and at dancing, but they always wanted to play, all the time. Now your teachers at school, I'm sure, and the priest in church has told you that it is wrong to play *all* the time; everyone does have a job to do. But the nice people inside the very dirty skin didn't want to do their jobs. When we told them that they had to work, what do you think they did? Why, they started hitting us. Nowadays there are very few people of color about, and only nice ones like Cleo, here.

Because you're so nice, Cleo, we have a special surprise for you. Would you like to have it now? Just go backstage with Ranger Chuck. Say goodbye to her, boys and girls.

Ranger Chuck, would you show our friend Cleo to the Dressing Room.

Now, boys and girls, I think we have just about time for one more cartoon. We won't be able to show it, though, unless every boy and girl watching prays hard, close your eyes so tight it hurts, pray, boys and girls, beg us to show the cartoon.

(The cartoon is about a funny little animal, a squirrel or a groundhog, that is chased by a wolflike creature. The squirrel has been working hard all fall to save food for the winter. He is happy with all the work he has done, because now he knows that he will be safe. The wolf is trying to steal the food, and eat the squirrel, too. Finally the squirrel gets all of his friends together. They are all cute, too, they look just like the first squirrel. They cut the wolf's heart out.)

Gee, I'm sure you were worried

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 125)

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Herewith a brief and delightful conceit in which our Science Fiction in Dimension *columnist concerns himself with—*

HOW GEORGES DUCHAMPS DISCOVERED A PLOT TO TAKE OVER THE WORLD

ALEXEI PANSHIN

GEORGES was making love to Marie when he made his discovery. She was, in truth, a most piquant thing with black hair and black eyes and skin of pale ivory. But, it cannot be denied, she had a button in a most unusual place.

"What is this?" Georges said. "A button?"

"But of course," she said. "Continue to unbutton me."

"No, no," he said. "This button."

He touched it with a finger and she *chimed* gently.

"You are not human," he said.

She spread her hands, an enchanting effect. "But I feel human. Most decidedly."

"Nonetheless, it is apparent that you are not human. This is most strange. Is it, perhaps, a plot to take over the world?"

Marie shook her head. "I am sure I do not know."

Georges touched the button and she produced another bell-note, quiet, bright and clear. "Most strange. I wonder whom I should inform? If there is a plot to take over the world someone should know."

"But how could I be unaware?" Marie asked. "I am warm. I am French I am loving. I am me."

"Nonetheless . . ." *Ding-g-g.* "It is incontrovertible."

Marie frowned. "Pardon," she said. "Turn again."

"Turn?"

"As you were. Yes." She stretched an inquiring finger, and touched. There was a deep and mellow sound like a pleasant doorbell.

"And what is this?" she asked.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he said in surprise. "Is that me?" He got up and went to look in the mirror, twisting somewhat uncomfortably, and sure enough, it was. He rang twice to make sure.

"In that case," he said, "it no longer seems important."

He kissed Marie and returned to the point of interruption. Skin of smooth pale beautiful ivory. I understand that if Georges receives the promotion he expects they are thinking of marriage in a year, or perhaps two.

—Alexei Panshin

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THE ICONOCLASTS
DENNIS O'NEIL

Dennis O'Neil reviews books for our companion magazine, AMAZING STORIES, and is probably best-known as the author of scripts for National Comics—now including Superman. *He brought us Gerard Conway (in our December issue), and now follows suit with his own first professionally published story. It's short, to the point, and not easy to forget.*

THE CUBE that was partly his father and partly his mother and partly all the other grownups—and also one of many identical cubes—spoke in a voice that rasped and snapped through his earphones, ordering him to destroy.

Orby asked why.

"You still have your body," the cube rasped. "I can not do it."

Orby knew that: he and two of his friends were left to do the last chores because they were small, and so consumed little of the remaining food and water.

"No," he said. "I mean, why does anything have to be destroyed?"

"I have ordered it thus," replied father/mother/grownups.

I have ordered it thus, mused Orby. Father didn't talk that way, and neither did Mother. He didn't know *anybody* who did, except the cubes the adults had become.

"Come on, kid," a new voice commanded. He turned toward the door: a suited person stood beckoning. Through the faceplate Orby saw that the newcomer was Lester, a boy four years older than himself.

"We're waiting for you," Lester complained. "Think we got all day, kid?"

Lester led him from the room, past heaps of ashes, and from the building—a *library,* Orby recalled. It was a pretty nice day outside: the black ripples which hung in the air were sparser than usual, there was enough sunlight to cast dim, occasional shadows on the pavement, and he could see the roof of the building, almost. A *fine* day.

A tractor was parked at the bottom of the steps, rear treads in the gutter, front treads nudging the stone pedestal. Lester boosted Orby to the cab, and they opened the bubble and entered. A girl (pink suit) was already inside. Orby recognized her: Raquel.

"Hi, Rake," he said. "Nice day."

"Sure is, Orby."

Lester twisted a knob: the seat vibrated beneath Orby's suit. Lester hit a switch and the tractor backed away

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from the lion, and Lester pulled a lever and the tractor began the trip up Fifth Avenue. A good ride, Orby felt—over piles of rubble and down slopes where the asphalt had collapsed and along subway tracks and through stations and out of the tunnels onto the avenue again, going quite fast.

"Rrrrrrr," Lester growled into his microphone as he drove. He had obviously watched the *Hot Wheels* tapes before they had been burned, along with the guitars and comic books.

They arrived at the Fifty-Ninth Street entrance to Central Park.

"Let's picnic," Raquel suggested.

They climbed down onto the dust and sat in a circle. Raquel nodded, and they each squeezed a bulb on the wrists of their suits. Orby winced at the familiar sting on his forearm.

"That was good," Raquel said.

"That's the end of it, though," Lester said. "I'm in charge of the glucose bank and I *know*—we've eaten final meal."

"We'd better get started then," said the girl. They climbed into the cab. Skinny vortices of dust whirled around the tractor—dun-colored whirlwinds that shimmered and danced all across the park, much different than the solid bellows-shapes.

"Oxygen rejuvenators," said Raquel as the tractor skirted a bellows. "They didn't work out."

"Too little and too late," Lester recited knowledgeably.

"The Gestalt's better anyhow," Raquel said. "*In*finitely better solution."

"Is that really true?" asked Orby. His special, private secret was that the cubes frightened him.

"Sure," Raquel answered, her words tinnier and flatter than words usually were, even through phones. "No more worries about food or clothing, no more wars, no more babies . . . everyone'll live forever in one big mind. It'll be grand."

Their destination lay directly ahead, a huge, square, soot-streaked block—The Museum. Lester kicked a pedal: the tractor lurched forward and smashed through a wall. Chunks of masonry thumped off the bubble and crunched beneath the treads and they were inside a hall—the largest enclosed space Orby had ever seen.

"End of the line," Lester announced, switching off the engine.

Raquel reached behind the seat and produced three torches, narrow metal rods attached to handles, and gave one to Orby and to Lester. The children then slid to the floor.

"You understand your jobs?" Lester asked. "We got to burn every painting and statue in this place."

"A painting is a picture?" Orby asked.

"Sure, stupid," Lester replied, stalking to a rectangle of bright color and twisting forms that hung nearby. He pointed his rod, thumbed a stud on the handle: the rectangle vanished in a flash that momentarily polarized Orby's faceplate; where it had been was only a wisp of smoke.

"Don't worry about the pollution," said Lester. "After this we'll be joining the Gestalt and it won't make any difference."

"And a statue?" Orby asked.

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In answer, Raquel aimed her torch at a person-shaped object and thumbed the stud. Flash; smoke. "*That* was a statue," she said. "*Ugly* thing."

"You start here, since you're the youngest," Lester told Orby. "Rake and I will take the upper floors."

The older pair ran to a wide staircase and scampered up it, blasting as they went. Orby could hear Raquel's giggles inside his helmet.

He began. Behind plastic plates that sent drifting soot shooting away in sudden spasms, he saw proud men in shining garments of strange cut and women with doll faces in collars of lace and infants with golden circles around their heads and beings with wings that were neither men nor women—these were the first kinds of paintings he burned.

Then, more. He paused to peer at the brass plate on one: . . . ST. JOHN . . . He remembered his pre-Gestalt mother speaking of St. John so he looked at it: a splendid man, handsome as his pre-Gestalt father, sitting with arms flung across a flat rock, fingers entwined, head slightly cocked, gazing into a misty distance, tense with anticipation, listening, *needing* to hear. With a thumb flick; Orby ended John's silent vigil.

Later, another painting arrested him—a field of undulating yellow, eye-biting yellow, the yellow made more vivid still by the glowing blue sky that lay atop it and trickled between its lines. He gazed at it a long while, marveling, wondering, summoning memories compounded of tapes, his parents' stories and perhaps something he had actually seen, once, years ago. When he flashed it, his hands were trembling.

In another chamber were statues of naked people, some with portions of their bodies missing, as though they were victims of a gnawing disease. He flashed them to smoke.

From room to room he walked, eyes squeezed to slits, no longer daring to look, not removing his thumb from the stud, leaving smouldering furrows in his wake.

—Until he came to a dark alcove. Nothing much there: four statues in a glass case—easy task.

One; flash.

Two; flash.

And three . . . Orby decided to allow himself a final peek. He broke the case lid with his torch handle carefully and lifted out a palm-size figure, a frail bit of crystal shaped like a bird with beak bowed, wings spread, the legs straight and the claws arched. Orby remembered tapes of birds: *this* bird, which had never lived, was more real, more beautiful. Its translucent form caught the dim light and splintered it to reds and pinks and greens and its chill, smooth surface seemed to pulse . . .

His phones crackled: Lester's voice. "You finished, Orby?"

"In a minute," he said.

He fumbled the figure into his suit pouch.

And three: flash.

He met Lester and Raquel in the main hall. They waited for him between wavering pillars of smoke: they were smiling. Orby started toward the tractor.

"We won't need that," Lester said.

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"There's a Gestalter just across the street."

The children went out of the museum, Lester and Raquel skipping. Orby followed, not skipping because a nameless weight dragged at his heels. They crossed Fifth Avenue, avoiding the holes and the shards of jagged asphalt, and came to a cube, and entered it. They sat in the seats, and waited as the metal shrouds descended, and as he saw light for the last time, Orby could finally put a name to the weight. He called it *mourning*. Spoke the word aloud, louder than the humming machinery that sucked at his mind, shouted: "I mourn." And the instant before he became an indistinguishable part of the whole, he demanded again: "Why?"

He/They/It answered without words, without voice, in a rushing montage of green fields and succulent tastes and joyous emptyings, and in this sentence: *I want no reminders.*

And then the suits were husks containing husks, and flesh stirred no more upon the Earth. The suited corpses pitched from the seats, and within the pouch of one, a crystal bird shattered.

—Dennis O'Neil

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Sol Cohen, Publisher

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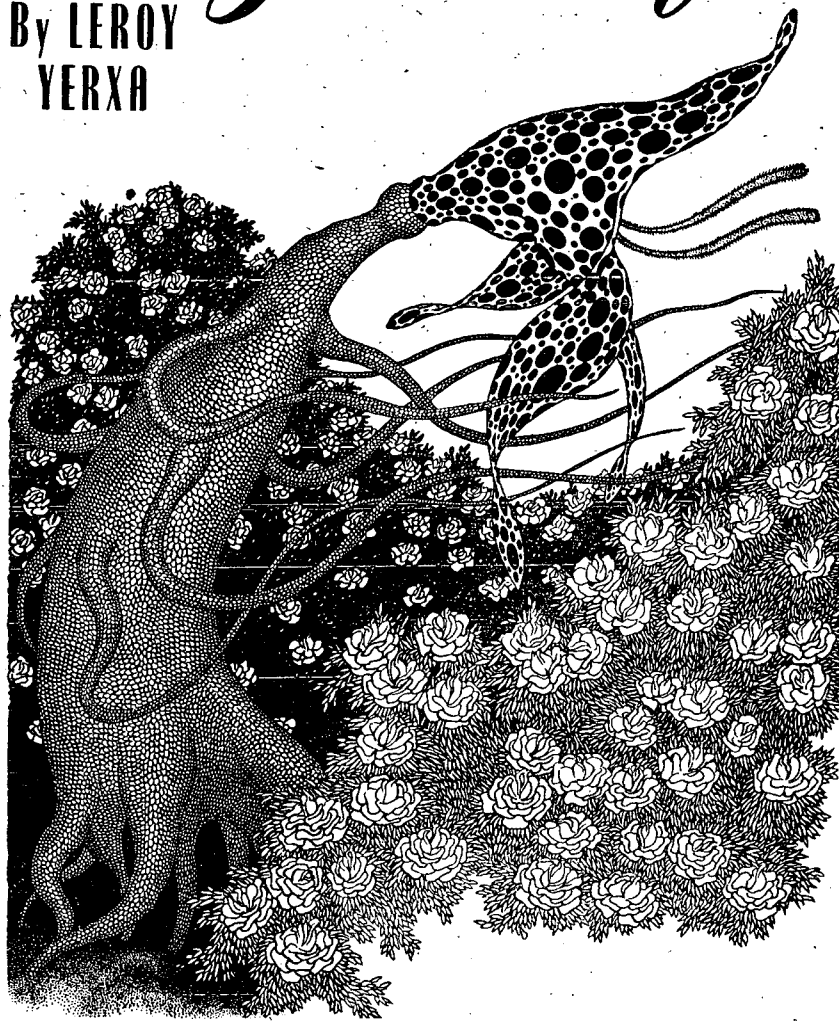
The Garden of

By LEROY YERXA



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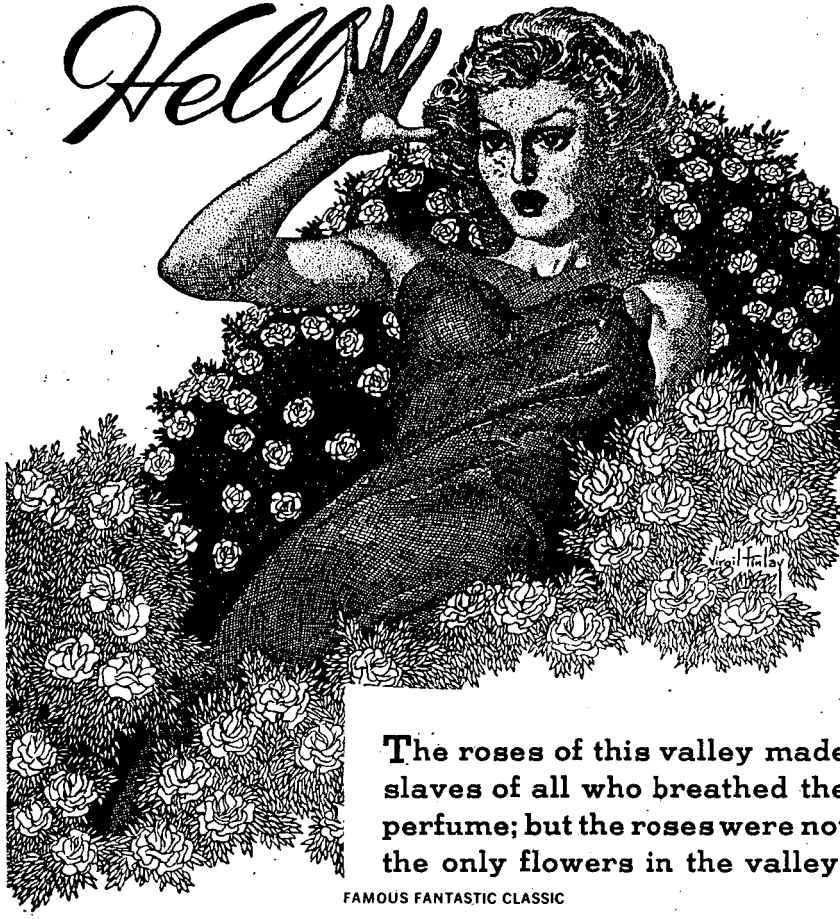
Hell's Valley



The roses of this valley made slaves of all who breathed the perfume; but the roses were not the only flowers in the valley!

FAMOUS FANTASTIC CLASSIC

THE booth was by far the most attractive along the line. A Mexican girl stood behind the high-banked roses, her deep brown eyes raised to him questioningly. Jeff Flynn wasn't aware of her at once, so absorbed was he in the lush, blood-red flowers. Then, raising his eyes, he saw for the first time the shapely oval face, full lips, and the long flowing brown hair that framed her features so beautifully.

"I beg your pardon." Flynn's hat came off in a quick gesture of admiration. "I didn't see you. Your roses are superb."

A flush of color spread over her face and the long lashes dropped shyly.

"They are not mine," her voice was low and husky. "This booth belongs to Trujall."

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As though answering to the name, another head appeared over the top of the display. Involuntarily Jeff Flynn stepped back a pace. He had opened his lips to compliment the owner of the booth, but no words came. The eyes into which he stared were black as swamp pools. Trujall was an old man. His head was hatless and a thick, black stubble grew from it. The skin of his cheeks stretched tightly over high cheek bones. He was smiling, but the smile was a grimace that showed rotten, toothless gums.

"You like my pretty ones?" The words were sharp and high-pitched.

Flynn controlled himself quickly and a smile lighted his face.

"They're the finest I've ever seen," he confessed.

A claw-like hand swept up and plucked one of the largest blossoms.

"A gift to a rose lover," Trujall's smile was set and vacant. "It is not often an American stops here."

Flynn took the flower, noticing the long, dirt-blackened nails on the hand that offered it.

"Thanks," he said. "I'd like to see your gardens. Are they near here?"

Trujall's smile vanished. He stared straight at Flynn.

"No one visits Tipico," he growled. *"It is a far journey."*

Taken aback by the unfriendly tone in Trujall's voice, Flynn fumbled for words.

"I'll be around in a few hours to buy some of your roses," he said.

Was it his imagination, or did a fleeting look of fear suddenly darken the girl's face?

"We will be gone within an hour," Trujall answered. "My flowers fade quickly here."

Trujall's ox cart was drawn up close to the adobe wall behind the booth. It was covered with a coarse cloth, but under the cloth, a half-dozen bulging objects were visible. Flynn's eyes caught a movement there, and as he stared, two long octupus-like tendrils dropped over the side of the rough boards and wrapped tightly around the wheel. They were perhaps two feet long and covered with brown scale.

Flynn stared. What sort of plant was that? The bulge under the cloth moved. Trujall wheeled around, noting the direction of Flynn's gaze. He was across the booth swiftly, grasped the tendrils with both his skinny hands and yanked them from the wheel. They withdrew suddenly and the movement stopped.

Trujall turned, his face hateful.

"You will go at once," his words were a command.

Flynn caught the wide-eyed expression of horror on the girl's face, hesitated, slightly angered by Trujall's attitude, then turned on his heel and crossed the street.

That Mexican girl had been badly frightened. Jeff Flynn, strangely disturbed at the knowledge, made an effort to thrust it from his mind. After all, it was none of his business. But what was it that was in the ox cart that Trujall was so anxious to conceal? Some forbidden plant he was smuggling?

HERBERT ROSS was no fool. Fat and passing the age where romance held sway over logic, he could appreciate a woman of Gwenn's ability.

The plane was hovering over Oaxaco when Gwenn turned to talk to him for the first time during the trip down. Gwenn Hamlin, only a few hours divorced from Ross, was pretty in a heady sort of way. Her green eyes, tall slim body and luxurious red hair made men half insane. Herb Ross knew. Gwenn had given him no peace during the two years they lived together. Brainless

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and brittle was his description of her; the willing plaything of any man who had money.

"Herby," Gwenn said. "Why don't you go home?"

Ross smiled.

"Chicago has a meat packing plant for me to go home to," he answered. "Why should I forsake you for a line of frozen beef?"

She sniffed, but a badly repressed smile flitted over her face. She was secretly flattered that he still pursued her.

"You'll get the cold shoulder down here," Gwenn said warningly. "Besides, Herby, it isn't right."

"What isn't?" he asked shortly.

"Why—when a girl's divorced, she doesn't just go about with her ex-husband. What will Jeff think?"

Ross snorted.

"Jeff Flynn is a good boy," he said. "But Jeff's young and spoiled by money he hasn't any use for. Gwenn, you only like Jeff's money. You'll be tired of each other in a week."

Gwenn's face sobered. She intended to marry Jeff Flynn, and Ross would never keep her from it.

"Look," she said. "I've been square with you . . ."

He interrupted her with a short laugh.

"You've never been square for a minute," he said quickly. "That's the part you don't understand, Gwenn. I'd have been willing to give you your head if you'd have held to the bridle just enough to impress my friends and business associates."

Gwenn was angry. She turned her head away and hunched her shoulders down into the seat. They were coming down for the landing. Ross fastened his safety strap.

"You want me to act as a front for you," Gwenn said. "I was playing second fiddle to your business."

"In a manner of speaking," he answered, "that's not what I *want*. I love you, Gwenn, but you won't return my affection. I took the best bargain I could get."

The plane came down smoothly and rolled across the field.

"You've lost me, Ross," Gwenn said. "Jeff will be at the airport. After that, we'll get married and you can pack your bag for the next plane home."

Ross was silent. Waves of blood swept up around his thick neck and colored his cheeks. The plane stopped before the small hangar, and he stood up.

"Flynn is a good kid, but he's got some crazy ideas," he said. "You're not going to marry him, Gwenn. Be sure of that."

She was standing before him, her eyes blazing into his. She stamped her foot impatiently.

"And what can you do to prevent it?"

Ross bent his heavy face close to her.

"*I'll kill you if I have to,*" he said in a hoarse whisper. "But I won't have to. You're going back to Chicago with me."

SPEECHLESS with rage, but frightened by this new Herb Ross, Gwenn followed him from the plane. A half-dozen passengers had gathered outside and a dilapidated station wagon stood by the road. The words *Oaxaco Hotel* were printed across its side.

She saw Jeff Flynn, tall and dust covered, a pipe in his mouth. She went toward him quickly, relieved that he was here to meet her.

Gwenn was less sure of herself than she had been when they last met. Herb might be right after all. Jeff was young and looking for adventure.

Her ex-husband filled her with foreboding over what his next move would

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be. She had never seen him pursue anything in this manner. He was frightening with his huge body and bullying voice, following her thousands of miles, never letting go the bull-dog grip he had on her past.

She went across the field quickly and into Flynn's arms. His kiss was on her cheek, rather cool she thought. Her ex-husband came up quickly, his hand held toward Flynn.

"Hello, Jeff," Ross' voice was friendly enough. "No doubt you wonder why I winged all the way down here under the circumstances. Well, I couldn't leave Gwenn in a wild country without friends. Acted as her personal bodyguard."

Flynn took the pudgy hand with mixed emotions.

"It *does* make an odd situation," he looked at Gwenn questioningly. "With your approval?"

Gwenn's face clouded.

"I tried to leave him in Reno," she said. "But I can't choose my flying companions. He's tried to make trouble all the way down."

Flynn clamped the pipe tightly between his teeth and picked up Gwenn's bags. Ross followed them across the dusty, cactus-grown field to the station wagon. He sat with the driver.

They were silent on the way to the hotel, and Flynn's hand drew away as Gwenn's fingers closed over it. He pretended to adjust the pipe, but she noticed that he carefully avoided her contact.

Gwenn was a lonely, shallow woman. The adventure of this new project was gone. There were two men for her, and she felt suddenly as though both of them had seen through her shield of glamor and were tearing her real self apart under steady scrutiny. She wished fervently that she had never seen Jeff Flynn, nor Reno. She wished for Chicago and the big mansion that Ross had kept for her. Gwenn felt tired and old and the mascara started to run on her lashes. The town was hot and airless and she had a dull, painful ache in her head.

Flynn arranged with the sleepy Mexican at the desk for a room for Gwenn opposite his own. Grinning, complacent Herbert Ross took the next room. The three of them climbed the worn stairs together and at his own door, Ross hesitated.

"Good luck, Jeff," he said, "you'll need it."

Before Flynn could reply, he was inside and the door closed with a slam. Flynn tried to smile reassuringly at the girl but it was no good. Away from soft lights and low music, she was a tired woman.

"You'd better rest," he said. "I'll be waiting on the sun porch when you're ready to go out."

ALONE, Flynn took off his clothes and stood under the shower. The cold water felt good against his dusty skin.

He thought about Gwenn. From the first it had never been right. Gwenn had seen him first at the Chez Paree. They had met on the dance floor and she was alluring and lovely in that setting. They had seen each other for a month, always at night and always in quiet, restful places where lovers talk.

She had waited to tell him of Ross. Waited purposefully, he realized now. A quick divorce had been arranged and they were to meet in Mexico City. Flynn knew now that he had lost any love he might have had for Gwenn.

Flynn left the shower, dried himself quickly and dressed in gray flannels. He went along the hall to the second floor porch and sat down in a cane chair to wait for Gwenn. The sun was

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warm and the heady sweetness of roses drifted from the flower booths down the street. His head relaxed against the back of the chair and he slept.

How long he had been there, his face baking in the sun, Flynn did not know. When he awakened the sun was slanting low across the red tile roofs and a slight breeze came from the west. He rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes and stretched.

Odd that Gwenn hadn't called him. She had plenty of time to bathe, apply new makeup, and look for him. Considering that she was eager to impress him favorably, she would have never willingly remained away from him so long.

A feeling of alarm entered his mind. Herb Ross wasn't a man to give Gwenn up after following her from the States to prevent her from remarrying. Flynn entered the hall with some misgivings and walked toward Gwenn's door. He knocked. It was quiet. He pushed inward. The door opened.

Herbert Ross sat on the single chair, his head lowered on the palms of his hands. He looked up, and his eyes were dull and cold.

"She was dead when I came in," he said.

Flynn went to the bed.

Gwenn's body was stretched out across the sheet, her legs hanging over the side of the bed. Her neck was twisted and thrown back at an odd angle. Her lips were swollen and blue and the eyes stared up at him, glazed and sightless. The skin of her neck was bruised. Her dress was torn.

FLYNN wheeled about.

"You fool," he spoke in a low, tense voice. "You damned fool. You didn't have to do this."

Ross arose slowly, steadying himself with one hand on the back of the chair. His eyes were red and his shoulders slumped forward in despair.

"I didn't kill her, Jeff." His lips quivered. *"Honest to God, Jeff, I loved her.* I came to plead with her again. She was lying here—like—this . . ."

Flynn wanted to believe him. The fat man seemed sincere enough, but the evidence was damning. No wild stretch of imagination would put another person in Oaxaco who hated Gwenn.

"You choked her," Flynn said. "No one would ever believe that you didn't."

Ross sat down again, looking away from the body. He tried to gain control of himself.

"I knew you'd say that," he looked Flynn straight in the eye. "That's why I've been sitting here, waiting for Heaven knows what. I couldn't come and tell you."

"When did you find her?" Flynn asked.

Ross was eager to talk.

"It was right after we came up," he said. "I decided to have one last talk with Gwenn. I found the door open and came in. I can't expect you to believe me, Jeff, but it's the truth."

Flynn walked to the window and looked down the street toward the flower show. The carts were gone. The street was dark and deserted.

"Jeff," Ross was close to him, his eyes low. "I want you to see something before you call the police. I—I can't think straight yet."

Flynn turned and Ross walked to the opposite side of the bed. He shuddered, reached out and touched the neckline of the girl's dress.

"Above her heart," he whispered.

Flynn watched as Ross drew the dress away. *There was a circular hole in the white flesh over the girl's heart. It was the size of a silver dollar, clean and deep. No blood soiled the flesh around it.*

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Ross drew the dress up again quickly.

"What did it, Flynn?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Jeff Flynn shook his head. No bullet or instrument that he could imagine would have left the deep bloodless wound he had seen on Gwenn's body.

"I'm damned if I know," he answered slowly.

Flynn put a firm hand on the older man's shoulder.

"I'll do everything I can," he said. "I don't believe now that you killed her. If it helps any, I didn't intend to marry her when I saw how much you cared for her. I was a fool I guess. We'll tell the police that we found her together."

Ross turned and grasped his hand. The grip was warm and grateful.

"Flynn, you're tops. You'll never know how much . . . "

He stopped talking and bent down over something on the floor. He started to pick it up, a shiver passed through his body and he dropped it again.

Flynn picked up the small object and held it between his fingers. It was about three inches long, fleshy and covered with brown scales. He had seen a thing like that before.

The thing in his hand was the cleanly chopped end of a feeler, *like the one he had seen creeping from the wagon of the rose gardener, Trujall.*

"WE'RE going to get out of here," he said sharply. "This is a clue I can follow. We'll call the police and leave before they get here."

"But they'll hunt us down and convict both of us," Ross protested. "I can't let you take the rap."

Flynn's eyes were icy.

"They'll lock us up and we'll never have a chance. If we escape now, perhaps we can find the murderer."

"But where—how?"

Flynn looked doubtful.

"I'm not sure," he confessed. "But we're going to visit the valley of Tipico."

"Never heard of it," Ross answered.

"You'll hear a lot from now on," Flynn said grimly. "It's a garden of roses, and I think—a garden of hell."

COUNT AVON BICARDA owned the valley of Tipico; owned the roses that grew in rank profusion within its warm borders; owned the souls of the people who straggled from the village each morning to tend the thorny, green plants on which his roses grew.

Since the Spaniards had come and gone, the Bicarda family had lived within the protected valley of Tipico and their power had not been questioned.

True, in the village there was one small group who kept to themselves. They neither toiled in the gardens nor slaved on the roads. But they were few and they did not trouble the Count.

He stood beside his horse on the hill above Tipico, staring first across the vast sweep of blood red roses beneath him and then anxiously toward the road that came from Oaxaca.

His dress was the dress of a Spanish nobleman. The flabby, weak face, the dreary eyes confessed weakness of character. A casual onlooker would have thought the Count on a movie set, attired as he was in the silken trousers, long silk stockings and tightly-buttoned white cloak of past centuries.

Closer study might betray the wrinkled stocking and the broken garter that hung at his knee, the torn cuff of his shirt that someone had forgotten to mend. Science would brand Avon Bicarda as mentally unbalanced.

His eyes brightened suddenly and the hand on the bridle tightened with excitement. An ox cart rolled toward him from over the hill. On the board

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seat, a young girl and an old man sat side by side. Trujall, the gardener, was returning from Oaxaca.

The Count mounted his horse clumsily and galloped toward them. At the side of the wagon, he stopped and dismounted. Trujall tapped the oxen with his staff and they halted. The girl watched the Count with surprise and distrust.

Ignoring Trujall, Count Avon Bicarda rounded the cart and bowed low before the girl.

"It is a pleasure to welcome Leona, the daughter of Textan, home once more," the Count said. His lips were set in a leer. "Will you allow me to take you to the village?"

Leona Textan's face paled with disgust.

"My father knows not of my journey to Oaxaca," she protested. "I must hurry straight home to him."

A sneer made the Count's face more simple to read.

"You may as well know that you will not return to the town," he hesitated. "Now or ever."

The girl turned to Trujall, her eyes pleading.

"You begged me to brighten your booth," she accused. "It is your duty to see that I am taken home safely."

TRUJALL'S head came around slowly. His eyes were amused. Planting the heavy butt of his staff in her stomach, he pushed with all his strength. She toppled into Count Bicarda's arms, and a scream of terror escaped her lips. Trujall poked the oxen and the cart rolled away.

Holding her tightly with one arm, the Count called after Trujall and the wagon halted.

"Your task," the Count shouted. "It was again successful?"

For the first time real satisfaction showed in Trujall's eyes. He turned, lifted the cover from the wagon and the Count hurried toward him. Leona Textan dropped to her knees in the dust, tears spilling down her cheeks. The Count glanced hurriedly under the cover and smiled.

"Bigger and stronger," he licked his lips. "You do well, Trujall."

Trujall smiled.

"Thank, you, master," he answered humbly. He turned to the oxen again, to conceal a sneer that was etched on his face.

"Master?" he whispered sneeringly under his breath. *"Fool!"*

He moved forward along the road into the valley.

Leona was on her feet, running toward the timber that bordered the upper valley. Count Bicarda mounted his horse and galloped after her.

Once she fell, scratched her knee and the blood ran from the wound. Looking back quickly she saw that he was almost upon her. She arose and limped forward, too frightened to call out. She reached the trees and ran in among them.

The man jumped from his horse and pursued her. She could hear his heavy footsteps on the soft earth and knew he was close. His arm reached her shoulder and jerked her roughly to a halt.

"Please—my father . . . " she gasped.

"Your father can't do anything," he snarled and tried to press her lips to his. She kicked and clawed him, fighting like an animal.

"You are going to my palace," he said. "It is useless to fight."

Suddenly Count Bicarda felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He was whirled around, and a fist smashed solidly against his jaw. He went down in a heap, gouging one shoulder into the earth. It stained his white coat.

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JEFF FLYNN turned to the girl, who had slumped to the ground, wide-eyed. He helped her to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Where did you come from?" she asked in bewilderment. "Seeing you here is so . . . so unexpected. No one comes so far off the beaten path . . . "

Flynn smiled at her.

"I came to get some of those roses. Remember, I said I'd be back to buy some?"

He turned to the fallen Count, who was sitting up, rubbing his injured jaw and rather foolishly trying to brush the dirt from his coat.

"Who is he?"

A look of terror crossed the girl's face.

"You shouldn't have hit him. He's Count Bicarda. He rules all of Tipico. He will make plenty of trouble for you."

Flynn shrugged.

"Not much more than we're in now, eh, Ross?"

Herbert Ross came forward. nodded glumly.

"This the fellow we're looking for?"

"No. We want a fellow named Trujall."

Flynn turned to the girl.

"Where is Trujall? . . . and by the way, what is your name?"

"Leona Textan," she answered. "But what do you want with Trujall?"

"We'd like to ask him a few questions," said Flynn grimly. "Where is he?"

There was terror in the girl's voice.

"You must go away! You must not go to him. It will not be wise . . . "

"It will not be wise not to!" exclaimed Flynn. "Will you take us to him?"

Leona stared at his intent eyes a moment, then nodded.

"Yes," she whispered. "I will take you to him."

THE valley of Tipico had a strange effect on Jeff Flynn. He had been vaguely worried since he first saw the fat Count pursuing the girl in the forest. Everything in Tipico went wrong. They were hardly out of the forest, Ross riding his horse beside that of the glowering Count and Leona Textan sitting before Flynn on his horse, when the odor of the roses started to penetrate Flynn's brain.

Tipico was one vast rose garden, stretching red as blood along the ten-mile floor of the valley. He felt the first rich fumes of the blossoms drift up to them as they went down the dusty road. The perfume filled his head and made him drowsy.

"I'd hate like the devil to *live* in this place," Ross said suddenly. "Those flowers are like opium. The smell is so sweet it deadens my brain."

Flynn could see a change in the girl also. She relaxed against him in the saddle, her eyes widened and her lips parted, almost like rose petals themselves. Her breathing was soft and she looked at him through half-closed lids.

"It is always like this," she said. "The valley is so pleasant that we who live here could not stay long in any other place. It is like a spell that casts itself upon us, making us happy where we are."

The horses jogged on slowly. The sun was bright above and they entered the boundaries of the town. Tipico was small—barely a dozen houses, a store and a few warehouses.

Count Bicarda began to bristle, and he grew truculent. Obviously, now that he was in his own bailiwick, he was losing his fear of the Americans. He glared at Flynn hatefully.

Leona saw the glare and she turned pale. She turned to Flynn and whis-

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pered in his ear.

"Please," she begged. "Run away now! While there is time. Take me with you!"

Flynn blinked.

"Take you with me . . . Good Lord, girl, aren't you being just a little . . . " Flynn had intended to say "dramatic" but his lips closed on the word. The fear in her eyes, the tenseness of her body beneath his encircling arm, spelled the sincerity of her convictions.

"No," he said grimly. "No two-bit local emperor is going to scare me out. I've come for a purpose. I want to see Trujall!"

"You will see him!" snarled Bicarda. "And you will see something else . . . *Halto!*"

They came to a halt before a building that Flynn took to be a general store. In the doorway stood a little man, not over five-foot-three in height, with a fierce black mustache that gave him an oddly friendly appearance. Dark, serious eyes hinted at their own ability to twinkle with humor. Right now they were sober and puzzled, and a frown wrinkled the skin at their corners.

"General Harzo!" snapped Bicarda. "Arrest these people!"

HARZO stared at Bicarda. He seemed somehow contemptuous, but at the same time there was an unwilling respect in his eyes. Something that was not fear, but yet was compulsory. Obviously, Flynn thought, Bicarda did have power in this valley—enough even to make this pseudo-general respect his commands.

"What is the charge, Count?" Harzo asked respectfully. But he made no move to comply with the arrest request.

The Count began to bluster.

"That gringo—he struck me. He attempted to interfere . . . "

Flynn interrupted.

"Absolutely, General Harzo," he said. "I did interfere. In fact, I pasted the Count in the jaw—where he had it coming. He was molesting this young lady here, against her will, and I did what any gentleman would do—what you would do in the same circumstances. And if I had time, I'd stay to prefer charges and ask you to lock *him* up."

Harzo turned to the Count.

"What about that?" he asked.

The Count's eyes narrowed.

"I repeat," he said, "this man attacked me. I was merely kissing the girl I have selected as my wife. We are to be married. In fact, we were on our way here to have you perform the ceremony."

Flynn swung down off the horse, lifted the girl down. He looked at her, startled.

"Is that true?" he asked incredulously.

Stark terror was in her eyes. She looked into his a moment, then looked away, tore from his grasp, and ran to stand beside the Count. She uttered no word.

"I'll be damned!" came Herbert Ross' exclamation.

Flynn paled with anger. He wheeled to face General Harzo. He reached forward and clutched the little General's shoulders.

"Listen," he growled in a low voice. "I did the girl a favor, understand? As far as the Count and his two-bit power are concerned, he can go jump in the lake."

General Harzo blinked, but his lips curled into an amused smile. His eyes held a peculiar look of approval.

"Good words, *amigo*," he said. "Now if you will let me go, I will give you some advice."

Flynn let go of him.

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"The Count grows roses here," Harzo said. "The people do as he says simply because they have done so for a thousand years. Perhaps that is why this girl wishes to wed the Count. We shall ask her and see."

The General turned to the girl.

"Do you wish to marry this man?"

She stared helplessly a moment at Flynn and Ross, then looked at Bicarda. His eyes were fixed on her with a glare.

"Yes," she said to Harzo. "Yes, yes!"

"You are not being forced to do this thing?"

"No," she said, face pale. "I am not being forced."

Harzo turned to Flynn and bowed.

"You see, *amigo*, it is all right."

"All right hell," growled Flynn, staring at the girl, who dropped her eyes before his accusing gaze. "But I guess there's nothing I can do about it."

"Do your duty, General Harzo," Count Bicarda spat out. "Or it will go badly with you."

Harzo's eyes flamed, but he said nothing to Bicarda. Instead he turned to Flynn.

"Therefore," he went on, as though ignoring Bicarda's outburst, "it is obvious that you have attacked Count Bicarda in a criminal manner, and I shall have to arrest you."

FLYNN leaped forward, fists doubled.

"Why, you . . . !"

Harzo clapped his hands and a soldier leaped out from behind a corner of the building.

"Arrest them!" snapped Harzo. "Take them over to my office. I will take care of their cases immediately after the wedding—"

He turned to Bicarda.

"—You wanted to have the ceremony immediately?" He waited for a confirmation.

"Yes," said Bicarda. "At once."

Leona Textan nodded dumbly.

Flynn walked across to Leona and grasped her arm.

"I know you're not doing this because you want to," he said. "I know you're afraid of something. Maybe it's the same thing I came here to uncover. Maybe it's Trujall . . . "

Count Bicarda shoved forward, tried to disengage Flynn's hand from Leona's arm. Flynn shoved him roughly back, so that he tripped over a bush and sat down. He ignored the Count's sputtering.

"It is Trujall, isn't it?" he pursued. "Tell me the truth."

The girl looked at him tragically.

"Go away," she whispered. "Go away, far from here. You will only come to harm in this valley. I am doing what I want to do. You have no right to interfere."

Flynn released her arm in bafflement, noting as he did so that Harzo had made no move, or order his soldier to make one, in assistance to the Count.

"Okay," he said. "But I'll find Trujall, and wring the truth out of him. Also, the truth about what happened back at Oaxaca!"

The soldier stepped forward now and motioned with his rifle. Flynn and Ross walked ahead of him up the stairs and into the general store. At the rear of it, Flynn saw that they were in some sort of office. There was a desk, several chairs, and another door. Flynn noticed with amazement that this inner office was cool; air-conditioned.

They were marched into a room with a barred window. The guard sat down outside the open door and held his rifle across his knees. He didn't close the door.

Ross looked at Flynn soberly.

"Well, we're in the clink. But at that, it's no worse than where we'd be back in Oaxaca."

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"No," said Flynn darkly. "But there's something damned fishy in this valley; more than what happened back there. I intend to find it out."

"I hope you do," said Ross despondently. "Because it looks like a murder charge for me, if you don't!"

FLYNN walked swiftly back and forth across the floor, white hot anger burning inside him. Ross sat quietly by the barred window, looking down the sun-swept street. Ross understood Flynn's feelings better than Flynn thought, remembering how *he* had felt when another man took Gwenn away. He didn't speak of it to Flynn. There was nothing they could do.

Ross watched Count Avon Bicarda's carriage come up the street. He saw Leona Textan sitting at the Count's side, her face drawn and pale. The Count was leaning back in the carriage, his eyes closed, face smug. The Count, Ross thought bitterly, was taking the whole thing quite calmly.

The carriage swept by the house and went down the road toward the far end of the valley. General Harzo walked toward their prison, his boots kicking up dust as he walked. Several minutes later another carriage went by. In the seats, several soldiers sat with rifles carelessly held. Their carriage disappeared down the road also. A guard for the Count and his new bride?

The General came in. He carried a stiff, folded document in his hand. Crossing the room he knelt at a large wall safe and put the document inside. Once he had twisted the knob and locked the safe he rose and faced Flynn.

"You can come out now," he said with a smile. "And if you gentlemen will honor me with your presence, we will go out and dine. Perhaps then you can confide to me the trouble and the mission that brings you here."

"What's that?" asked Flynn, astounded.

"You can come out. You are free. You are not, and have never been, under arrest. I am sorry that I had to inconvenience you, but you will understand that it was the simplest way to avoid trouble all around. Count Avon Bicarda is a power in the valley—although not as great as his mad mind conceives himself to be. So humoring him was the best policy. He will never think of you again."

"But that girl," said Flynn angrily. "She did not want to marry him. She was terrorized."

Harzo shrugged.

"She signified her desires very directly," he said. "Come, we will dine. No doubt you are hungry."

He led the way toward a restaurant and they ordered.

It was one o'clock then. At three, the carriage of soldiers returned from their ride down the valley. They brought with them the news that the carriage of Count Avon Bicarda had been attacked by strange bandits half-way to the palace.

The Count had been shot through the heart and had died at once. The girl was unharmed and being escorted to her new home. The carriage of soldiers had arrived in time to fight the bandits, but too late to save the Count.

GENERAL HARZO, his lips stern and face expressionless, ordered the news to be posted at once. Count Avon Bicarda was dead and the valley belonged to his new wife, Leona Textan.

"*Senor* Flynn," Harzo said suddenly, placing his half-empty wine glass on the table before him, "I have a question to ask you."

Flynn looked up with moody eyes.

"I'm afraid, General," Flynn said, "you and I have little to discuss. You

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can perhaps see now the heritage you gave that girl. She's widowed before she reached her home."

"I'm sorry, American, that you think harshly of me. I think it is best that you know the truth. Perhaps you can give me the help I so badly need."

Flynn was watching the mustached man carefully. Ross' head never came up from his food.

"You were angry that I insisted the girl marry," the General went on. "You wonder why . . . ?"

"Insane," Flynn broke in. "I'd like to drag you before the authorities anywhere outside the valley and watch you sober up."

General Harzo rose to his feet.

"It was necessary that, to fulfill my plan, Leona Textan marry Count Bicarda. I had no intentions of letting them reach their home."

Flynn's glass dropped to the table with a crash. Ross stopped eating, mouth open, fork poised.

"You see," Harzo added, "my full name is General Harzo Textan. Leona is my daughter."

FOR some time the three men faced each other, but none of them spoke. Flynn arose, rounded the table and offered his hand to the General.

"Accept my apology," he begged. "I don't know what you've got in mind, but I'm sure you won't allow them to harm your own daughter. If we had known, we'd have kept our mouths shut."

Harzo Textan smiled and took Flynn's hand.

"I know," he said quietly, "I guess I can trust you. Perhaps it will be best if I tell the story of Tipico."

He pushed his chair from the table, crossed to the fireplace and stood before it. A frown passed over his face.

"I have not always lived in Tipico," he started. "Many years ago, before Leona was born, I lived in Mexico City. I was a *politico* at the time, and held some high offices. My wife died at Leona's birth and I asked for retirement. They wanted to do something for me, in return for my services to the government."

He paused, smiled wearily and went on.

"Some one knew of Tipico, and thinking it a quiet, sunny place, suggested that I come here. Oddly enough I was given the governing power of the valley and the Mexican government will back up my word here."

"Have you ever had to call upon them?" Ross asked curiously.

Harzo nodded and smiled.

"But once," he answered. "Since the soldiers came to the valley and the people realized I was the governor, they have done as I say. There was one exception."

"Count Avon Bicarda?"

"Yes!" Anger blazed in the General's eyes. "Bicarda has lived here since birth. Before him was his father and so back into the years. The family is degenerate and low. They know but one industry. Every year, the petals of the roses are taken to Oaxaca and made into perfume."

"I've noticed an odd thing," Ross said. "The air conditioning in your office, in this restaurant, wherever *you* go."

Harzo nodded and smiled slightly.

"Yes, you are right," he admitted. "That is how I remain free of the spell of the flowers. The people here live in a semi-awakened state. The power of the flowers is so great that they have no will to fight. They stay here and work until they die *or are murdered.*"

Flynn's jaw stiffened. He was thinking of Gwenn. Gwenn with that strange round hole in her flesh.

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"Murder?"

The General's fists were clenched.

"There are many things one does not mention," he said. "But now I can tell you the whole story. The Count needed men and women here to work in his gardens. He also needed them for another purpose. For the second — he demanded one qualification."

"And that?"

"Death," the General answered in a low voice. "They were found dead in the fields. I am sure it was murder."

"But great God, man," Flynn protested. "Surely you could have stopped it?"

"That is where you are wrong. Every flower-drugged man in the valley would have risen against me; if they had cared. I could not act."

"I'D LIKE to ask you a question, General," Ross said. "You married Leona and the Count for a purpose?"

"I had planned that for years," he admitted. "It was the one way of getting control of Count Bicarda. With Leona married to him, I could go to his palace and find out for myself what was happening there."

"But surely there were other ways," Flynn said. "With your soldiers you could have forced your way in and searched the place."

General Harzo Textan shook his head.

"There was but one way to break the power of the Bicarda over this valley."

Ross looked hostile.

"So you did it by marrying your daughter into the family and then killing her husband. The valley of Tipico belongs now to Leona Textan—*and to you!*"

The General's eyes flashed.

"You are a smart man, Ross," he said. "But I am not responsible for the bandits who killed the Count."

"But it was you who sent soldiers after him as the Count left town," Ross said. "Not more than a quarter of a mile separated the two carriages. There would hardly be time for an outside attack."

Harzo nodded.

"That is all very logical," he admitted, "but not the truth."

"I'm not so sure of that," Flynn interrupted. "There are some things I don't like. General, what do you know about Trujall?"

"I don't know . . . " began Harzo worriedly.

He was cut short by a loud commotion in the hall. The door to the room swung open and a soldier staggered in. His uniform was torn and covered with mud. He tried to salute the General and fell forward on his face.

Flynn dropped to one knee and turned the man over. The fellow's eyeballs were turned up queerly and he was gasping for breath.

"General . . . your daughter . . . " Flynn's ear was close to the quivering lips, "Trujall . . . "

The voice faded to a whisper. The dying man clutched his heart and a shiver passed over him. He tried to speak further, but his lips gurgled wordlessly and closed.

Flynn stood up quickly.

"You have horses?" he asked of the General.

Harzo nodded.

"I'll get them." He rushed out.

When the General had left the room, Flynn drew the stiff white hand of the soldier gently away from the bloodied shirt. A whistle escaped his lips.

"Look at that, Ross!"

There was a deep, circular hole in the flesh over the heart. "The same thing that killed Gwenn! We're on the right track!"

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The General came in and two men were with him. He spoke quickly in Spanish and the soldiers picked up the dead man and carried him away.

"Let's go," Harzo said grimly, "and may the Saints protect my daughter until we reach her."

FLYNN and Ross rode close to each other on the big horses Harzo Textan had supplied.

Harzo rode ahead of them, his eyes focused on the building three miles away, that was the Bicarda palace.

Flynn felt a strange sleepiness coming over him. The valley air seemed warm and muggy.

"It's a fight to keep awake here," he said.

The General spoke to them sharply.

"Breathe as lightly as possible. It is the power of the roses," he cautioned. "In my own town I have clean, cool air and I am not affected. Here, men and women go unprotected. The roses numb the brain like a drug."

Flynn watched the palace ahead of them grow and take shape beyond terraced slopes. It was as lovely as the valley. Roses spread up across terraces and about the lawns. Trellises against the walls were alive with red flowers.

"When we get close enough," Flynn said, "I'll drop off behind. You and the General ride straight in and go to the front door. I'll take a look around before anyone suspects I'm here."

They reached the bend in the road where it turned toward the palace. Flynn reined his horse out of sight behind the bushes. He watched as the two men rode up to the palace, tied their mounts and went to the door. As the door opened the General walked in, followed by Ross. The door closed.

For some time Flynn waited. A gathering storm was hastening the dusk. He studied the house. In his mind was the image of those plant tendrils under the cover of Trujall's ox cart. Flynn wanted to see that ox cart and its contents again. Perhaps a search of the out buildings . . .

He crossed the lawn quickly and went behind the palace. There was a small vegetable garden.

He saw the carriage house looming, perhaps fifty yards beyond the garden. The small plot in which he stood was planted with bulb like plants that protruded eight or ten inches above ground. He started to walk among them quickly, caught his boot on the roots and fell.

A tiny, whip-like object snapped out and struck his face. Another wrapped quickly about his boot.

Flynn struggled to his feet only to find that he was trapped. The tentacles had suddenly come alive. More of them were stretching toward him. The tendrils were much smaller and yet he recognized the form. They were small plants of the same type he had seen in Trujall's wagon!

Flynn's feet were solidly held in place now, perhaps a dozen of the tendrils wrapped tightly about his boots. He whipped out his knife, slashed them away. It was a foolish move. Two plants were close to his hands. They flashed toward him and secured his wrists tightly. He jerked with all his strength. Thin, watery stuff oozed from the cut vines. His hands were bloody. The knife fell from his grasp.

One bulb-plant under his body moved. He felt a soft, petal like substance brush across his shirt and the plant or creature, whichever it was, pushed a round snout against him.

Horror stricken, Flynn strained away from the sharp snout and tried to break away. It was useless.

This was the way Gwenn Ross had died!

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THE scaly, eager snout was sucking at his flesh now. His shirt was torn and he felt the thing cutting into him bringing blood to the surface.

Flynn shouted hoarsely.

"*Ross, help. I'm behind the house in the garden.*"

Almost at once he heard a door open and saw three faces over the porch rail above him. The light from the room flashed out across the garden and he could see other plants waving and leaning toward him. The pain over his heart was terrible.

"This is it, Ross!" he shouted. "Trujall's plants are killers. Help me!"

Flynn saw Ross wheel about and send a crashing blow into Trujall's face. A gun exploded; a shot sang through the air. Ross cleared the rail with a leap and hit the ground on his feet. He carried a huge knife; a machete snatched from where it hung on the wall, obviously for just the purpose for which he was now going to use it.

Trujall's curse came from the porch. There was the sound of a scuffle. Flynn could no longer see the porch. His eyes were filled with pain and his body contorted, fighting the awful tendrils.

Ross swore loudly and came wading in. The huge knife swung wildly on all sides. Sometimes he staggered and seemed about to fall. Then, howling oaths at the top of his voice, he tore away a blade covered with wriggling tendrils and came on.

At Flynn's side he reached down and sent the knife shooting into the plant under Flynn's body. The suction stopped and the thing dropped away. He cut the bonds from Flynn's body and dragged him to the edge of the garden. Flynn fell forward on his face and lay still. He was breathing hard.

"Entertaining," it was Trujall's triumphant, but angered voice. "But you have ruined my new crop of plants. For that you will all pay."

Ross helped Flynn to his feet. The General had been overcome in his scuffle on the porch with Trujall. He was covered now by the same pistol that menaced Flynn and Ross.

"Thanks, Ross," Flynn recovered his breath. "I didn't know what I was walking into."

They mounted the porch and faced Trujall. His face held a smile of complete triumph.

"Where is the girl," Flynn faced the dwarf, his fists clenched. "You've done something to her."

Ross took his arm.

"Never mind, Flynn," he urged. "Leona is safe. We've seen her already. We'd better take it easy."

Trujall held his gun ready.

"That is wise," he said. "We have already had enough excitement. To wander around here longer might result in a disaster that could not be avoided so easily. Enter and be entertained."

THEY entered a high, well-lighted room. It was pleasantly furnished and warm. Trujall motioned to a couch at the far end of the place. Leona Textan was there, lying with partly closed eyes. The room was rich with the scent of roses and they were piled about the girl.

A strange mixture of relief and anger spread over Flynn as he stood there, looking at her. She was clad in the same rough dress, but the flowers spread a perfume about her that made the whole room shimmer under her spell.

"You will be seated?" Trujall asked, pocketing his gun. "There will be coffee."

Flynn wanted to go toward the girl, but something robbed him of energy. It didn't seem important.

"She is all right?" he asked the General.

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Harzo Textan nodded listlessly.

"The roses," he explained. "They make her tired and restful. Otherwise she is safe."

Flynn felt tired. He wanted sleep very badly. A serving woman brought a tray of coffee and he sipped his while the others drank. Leona closed her eyes and slept. Her father went to her once, and felt of her forehead. He seemed satisfied.

"She has had a hard day," he announced vacantly. "It will be better for us to stay here tonight and go to the village with the morning."

Trujall went to the door.

"There are only myself and the serving maid here," he said. "I am sorry about the incident in the garden. They are but a hobby of mine and I was angry when I saw the plants destroyed. If you stay out of my gardens you will be safe."

He went out and they heard him leave the porch.

The maid came and led them to their rooms. Flynn was worn out. He sank to the bed and was sound asleep before he had time to remove his clothes.

FLYNN awakened suddenly, his body covered with perspiration. It was dark. His head ached dully. Why was he here in this bedroom? He could not remember leaving the lounge where Trujall had faced them with the pistol. Leona Textan had been stretched out before them, asleep on the divan.

He had succumbed to the sweet odor of the roses, and Trujall's insistence that no harm would come to them. Flynn remembered accepting a cup of coffee from the house maid and watching Ross and General Textan do the same.

That was it. The coffee had been drugged. That, and the roses!

Flynn sat up quickly, saw that he was fully clothed. He rushed to the door.

He stepped into the hall and listened. No sound came from the rooms below. It seemed sinister. Trujall was the power behind this garden of hell. He used the people of the valley like pawns, never soiling his own hands with murder. He left that to . . .

Flynn thought of Leona. The girl had been in the main lounge below the staircase. The thought of her shocked his brain more fully awake.

Half-way down stairs, Flynn stopped short. A high-pitched scream of terror came from the rose garden behind the house. He rushed across the room and out on the high porch. Leona Textan was visible several hundred yards away. She was running between long rows of rose bushes.

The moon made her shoulders glisten. Once she looked back—screamed again and rushed onward. Flynn's boot struck something. He reached down and retrieved the heavy knife that Ross had used earlier in the evening.

Flynn cleared the rail with one leap. He ran swiftly across the lawn and into the rose garden after Leona.

"Stop, or I'll shoot."

Flynn saw the stubby figure of Trujall on the porch with pistol aimed.

"Go to hell!" he shouted and kept on running. Leona had disappeared now. A shot rang out and the bullet whistled over his shoulder.

The second shot hit the bricks of the carriage house close to his head and sang away into the bushes.

"Leona," he shouted. "Leona. Where are you?"

The silence was maddening. Forgetting Trujall, he ran over the soft dirt and down the lanes of rose bushes.

HE RAN onward, glancing back once to see a light visible on the second

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floor. Perhaps Ross or the General had finally awakened. He shouted something hoarse and wordless over his shoulder, hoping one of them would hear the sound.

There was a small opening ahead. It was perhaps ten feet square and bordered by the rank, luxurious growths of roses. At the far side he saw Leona, cowering down. Her body was twisted as though she were trying to run—to go farther, but couldn't move. Her lips were opened in a round O of horror and one arm was thrown before her face as she sought protection from her pursuer.

Flynn saw the thing that had caused her panic and stopped short. The other octopus-like plants had been bad enough. Now he knew he was looking straight at the thing that had killed Gwenn and the soldier.

It had the same general characteristics as the others, but it was almost as tall as a man. The thing, plant or animal, walked on nine short feeler-like legs. It moved swiftly, its thick, scaly body vibrating smoothly as it moved. A half-dozen long, root-like feelers protruded from the body. They reached out and wavered in the air, the tips reaching three feet from the body. Its head was a net of muscular fiber with a sharp, cup-like opening at its top.

The cup was the identical size of the wound he had seen on Gwenn's body.

From the edge of this cup a blossom grew. It was a type of orchid, huge and spotted, but unclean. Out of its center came two feelers that evidently gave it a sense of touch and smell that allowed it to pursue its victims.

The thing was crossing the clearing slowly, warily, seeking the girl. It knew she was there. The footsteps had halted and the prey was close.

Flynn went forward slowly, the knife raised over his head. Close to the creature, he brought the knife down in a wide arc. It struck from behind, just below the cup-like neck. The spotted blossom flopped to the ground and the neck fell with it.

The creature whirled around and feelers swept out and around Flynn's waist. Red blood started to pour from the cleanly severed neck. Flynn dropped his knife and tried to release the tentacles that held him. The girl came toward them. Flynn felt the tentacles go around his throat and remembered how easily Gwenn had been strangled.

Leona waited until the feelers were tightly wrapped about Flynn. He was on the ground now.

She clutched the knife firmly and pushed it deep into the creature's body. The movement stopped.

The feelers grew limp one by one and fell away from him. Shaking from the strain, Flynn stood up slowly and kicked the thing away from him.

SHE RAN to him quickly, throwing her arms about his neck. For a moment Flynn forgot Trujall and the men at the house. He was conscious only of the frail, lovely girl in his arms.

"You understand now why I married Avon Bicarda?" she whispered.

Flynn nodded.

"Your father told me everything," he said.

She snuggled closer.

Men were coming from the house. He took his arms from her and turned to see Ross, Trujall walking before him, as they came through the roses. Trujall saw the bloody monster that lay at Flynn's feet, and sobbing, knelt on the ground before it. Ross looked down with cold hatred in his eyes. He carried a pistol. Flynn recognized it as Trujall's.

"I heard you shouting," Ross said quietly. "Found Trujall in the garden

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trying to release more of these things. He's got a whole cage of them behind the carriage house."

"They didn't escape?" Flynn asked.

Ross shook his head.

"Still behind bars," he said. "We'll starve them to death. Trujall had to fool with the door and I took the liberty of kicking him in the stomach and taking his gun away from him."

The ugly face of the dwarf turned up to Flynn. Blood stained the man's hands where he had fondled the dead creature and tears were in his eyes.

"You killed him," he accused. "You killed my pet."

Ross' eyes were flinty.

"And I'll kill you!" he snarled.

Flynn shook his head.

"No, Ross. When the General awakens," he said. "I think he'll take a certain pleasure in sentencing Trujall and putting him before the firing squad."

"Trujall, why in hell did you pick on my wife?" asked Ross.

Trujall had arisen slowly, his long arms hanging at his side. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I had to have a white woman," he said slowly. "She was the only one in Oaxaco. Many Mexican women and men have given their blood to my *king-plants*. I could give life to the tuber bodies of the plants by shooting certain injections into them. They did not react to natural emotions without the blood of humans in their body."

Flynn was filled with a deep disgust.

"But you," he asked coldly. "What were you gaining by this?"

Trujall shrugged his shoulders.

"I have had everything I wished from the house of Bicarda," he admitted. "The *king-plants* were my hobby. They drank blood and became things alive and powerful. I raised them to make up in a way, for my own lack of power. You see my body is very ugly. Not at all tough and strong like my pets."

Ross' face was a mask of loathing.

"You murdered these people and gave their blood to these—these creatures of hell, for no reason other than to satisfy your own lust for power?"

Trujall did not answer. Instead he was on his knees again, carefully gathering up the remains of the thing on the ground.

Ross turned to Flynn and his eyes were pin points.

"You'd better take the girl away from here, Jeff," he said.

Jeff took Leona by the arm and led her up toward the house. They were hidden from the two men in the roses.

"What is he going . . ."

Her lips remained parted, but her voice was broken by the sharp crack of the pistol. Two more shots sounded behind them. Jeff stopped, standing very quietly. He thought he heard a groan of pain, then quick footsteps in the dirt.

Ross caught up with them, and walked toward the house without a word. They reached the garden and Flynn looked away across the peaceful rose gardens and then back at the strong, handsome house. He took Leona close to him in the darkness.

THE END.

COMING JUNE FANTASTIC STORIES

On Sale Mar. 25th—POUL ANDERSON'S latest new novel, THE BYWORLDER. Also starting in this issue will be the first of a series of articles by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP, LITERARY SWORDSMEN AND SORCERERS: SKALD IN THE POST OAKS.

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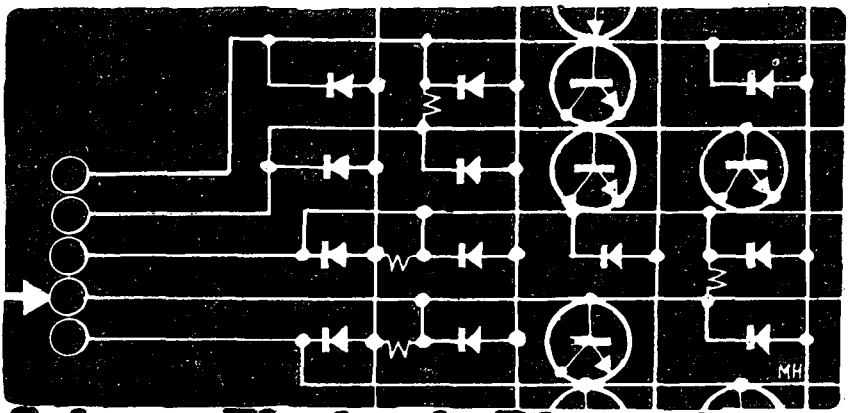

Science Fiction in Dimension

a critical column by ALEXEI PANSHIN

THE SHORT HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION

On October 25, 1963, Hugo Gernsback gave an address before the M.I.T. Science Fiction Society. He said, "What I detest is the parading of pure fantasy stories as science fiction and their sale as such to gullible readers. I consider this an out-and-out fraud. It was particularly humiliating to me when I read the 1962 volume of the *Hugo Winners,* which the publisher, on the cover, lightheartedly labeled *'Nine prize-winning science fiction stories.'* Well, in my book it should have read 'Eight fantasy tales, plus one science fiction story.' "

Hugo Gernsback invented the term "science fiction". The Hugo Awards presented annually at the World *Science Fiction* Convention were named for him. And yet he disowned eight of the first nine winners of the short fiction Hugo Award. The stories were "The Darfstellar" by Walter M. Miller, Jr., "Allamagoosa" by Eric Frank Russell, "Exploration Team" by Murray Leinster, "The Star" by Arthur C. Clarke, "Or All the Seas of Oysters" by Avram Davidson, "The Big Front Yard" by Clifford D. Simak, "The Hell-Bound Train" by Robert Bloch, "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes, and "The Longest Voyage" by Poul Anderson.

Which of the stories was legitimate? Was it one of the five stories from *Astounding,* the technical man's science fiction magazine? Was it Murray Leinster, whose story from the 1919 Argosy, "The Runaway Skyscraper", was reprinted in the third issue of *Amazing* and who wrote again for Gernsback's last science fiction magazine, *Science Fiction* +, in the 1950's? Was it Clarke, whom Gernsback in this same speech calls "the most outstanding true science fiction personality"? Was it Anderson, whose story was rated on its astronomy in a letter to *ASF* by Hal Clement and in a reply by Anderson—The Game, gentlemen, The Game?

My best guess is Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon" from *F&SF.* That's just my best guess. But whichever it was, remember, the other eight, whichever they were, were not science fiction.

Note: I would like to gratefully acknowledge my use of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University in the preparation of this column.

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By 1963, Gernsback had had a good look at the transformation of the genre. He didn't like it. He called it "decadence". Like Sturgeon, who has said that ninety per cent of science fiction is crud, Gernsback said that ninety per cent of science fiction was fantasy and unacceptable. The question is whether the ten per cent would be the same.

The *Science Fiction* Writers of America—Gernsback's heirs—have put together an anthology of vintage short science fiction, stories that might have been Nebula winners had the Nebula Awards existed before 1965. The stories are "A Martian Odyssey" by Stanley G. Weinbaum, "Twilight" by John W. Campbell, "Helen O'Loy" by Lester del Rey, "The Roads Must Roll" by Robert A. Heinlein, "Microcosmic God" by Theodore Sturgeon, "Nightfall" by Isaac Asimov, "The Weapon Shop" by A.E. van Vogt, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" by Lewis Padgett, "Arena" by Fredric Brown, "Huddling Place" by Clifford D. Simak, "First Contact" by Murray Leinster, "That Only a Mother" by Judith Merril, "Mars Is Heaven" by Ray Bradbury, "The Little Black Bag" by C. M. Kornbluth, "Scanners Live In Vain" by Cordwainer Smith, "Born of Man and Woman" by Richard Matheson, "Coming Attraction" by Fritz Leiber, "The Quest for Saint Aquin" by Anthony Boucher, "Surface Tension" by James Blish, "The Nine Billion Names of God" by Arthur C. Clarke, "It's a *Good* Life" by Jerome Bixby, "The Cold Equations" by Tom Godwin, "Fondly Farenheit" by Alfred Bester, "The Country of the Kind" by Damon Knight, "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes, and "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" by Roger Zelazny. The book is called *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. I,* edited by Robert Silverberg. Its contents are a fair history of science fiction. These were the writers and stories that we have respected. If any stories belong, these must be a part of Sturgeon's ten per cent.

How many of these stories would Hugo Gernsback acknowledge as *really* science fiction?

Here is Gernsback in 1963:

"When, in April, 1926, I launched the first issue of *Amazing Stories,* I called it 'The Magazine of Scientifiction.' Not a very elegant term, I admit, but I had the fixed idea, even in those early days of science fiction, that *Amazing Stories* henceforth was to be known as a scientific fiction monthly, to distinguish it from any other type of literature.

"Not content with that slogan, after a good deal of thought I added a second, more explanatory one: 'Extravagent Fiction Today—Cold Fact Tomorrow.'

"I carried both of these slogans on the editorial page between 1926 and 1929, as long as I published *Amazing Stories.*

"Later, for Vol. I, No. 1, of *Science Wonder Stories* in June, 1929, I wrote another descriptive slogan: 'Prophetic Fiction is the Mother of Scientific Fact.' I think this still means what it says. Science Fiction—under *any* term or name—must, in my opinion, deal first and foremost in futures.

"It must, in story form, forecast *the wonders of man's progress to come.* That means distant exploits and exploration of space and time. [But *not* two of these three stories: "The Star", "Exploration Team", and "The Longest Voyage". Or perhaps not any of them.]

"Contrary to the opinions of many latter-day, so-called science fiction authors, the genre of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells has now been prostituted to such an extent that it often is quite impossible to find any reference to science in what is popularly called science fiction

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today.

"The classic science fiction of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, with little exception, was serious and, yes, instructive and educational. *It was not primarily intended to entertain or to amuse.* These stories carried a message, and that is the great difference between technological science fiction and fantasy tales. I repeat: Either you have *science* fiction, with the emphasis on *science,* or you have *fantasy. You cannot have* both—the two genres bear no relation to each other." (Gernsback's italics throughout.)

Of the stories in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame,* Gernsback published only one, the earliest, Stanley C. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" Would that qualify as *"science* fiction, with the emphasis on *science"* or as "fantasy"? You cannot have both.

For comparison, here is a scientifiction story for you, "Sam Jones, Radio Tube Bootlegger," by Volney G. Mathison: "A story of the bad old days when there were sharp practices in radio—and how some of the practitioners came to grief in carrying out their designs on the unwary public. If it is not true, it is well enough invented to convey a moral to radio-set owners in their purchasing of supplies."

That isn't "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" or "Coming Attraction" or "Born of Man and Woman" or "A Martian Odyssey."

If Gernsback is *right—and* we have to assume that he is, since he wrote the definitions—when did false science fiction start being passed off for the real thing? We also have to ask why.

Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in April, 1926 with the same clear vision of science fiction that he continued to see in 1963. From the first issue, he sounded the same themes—science fiction was *prophetic, educational,* and *clean.* "A scientifiction story should be seventy-five per cent literature interwoven with twenty-five per cent science." "Science fiction . . . is a tremendous new force in America. They are the stories that are discussed by inventors, by scientists, and in the classroom. Teachers insist that pupils read them, because they widen the young man's horizon, as nothing else can. Wise parents, too, let their children read this type of story, because they know that it keeps them abreast of the times, educates them and supplants the vicious and debasing sex story." And Gernsback knew how to honor his own ideas in his "What Science Fiction Means to Me" letter contest. Second Honorable Mention, Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.: "To the scientist no class of fiction has a lure even approaching that of carefully considered and well written science fiction." First Honorable Mention, Jack Williamson: "A new era dawns. . . . Science will answer the call, with a thousand new inventions—inspired by science fiction." First Prize, B.S. Moore: "A few months ago I could not understand the fourth-dimension, that is, as the scientific world regards it. Today I do understand it, as it is understood in theory, of course, and I owe it to science fiction. True, the majority of writers are practically individual in their theories, but by weighing these and comparing them one can eventually reach the general explanation."

Gernsback wanted to call his magazine *Scientifiction.* He settled on *Amazing* when "after mature thought, the publishers [i.e. Gernsback] decided that the name which is now used was after all the best one to influence the masses, because anything that smacks of science seems to be too 'deep' for the average type of reader."

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Gernsback had been publishing science fiction since 1908 in his various magazines, particularly in *Radio News* (which printed "Sam Jones, Radio Tube Bootlegger") and *Science and Invention. Science and Invention* was a more interesting *Popular Mechanics* which published both the Herman Kahn—*Year 2000* type of prophetic article and the fictional equivalent. One recent prophetic book, *Toward the Year 2018,* bills itself as *More Amazing Than Science Fiction:* "Science fiction? Not at all. These are bits of the real world of tomorrow as seen by a dozen eminently practical men, leaders in science and technology, who are even now helping to shape the world of today." (To which I say, we shall see, we shall see.) In any case, Gernsback had a taste for dramatized prophecy. He wanted fiction about the unknown that respected the known.

What did he publish? He published Poe—"the father of 'scientifiction.' " He published Verne—"He predicted the present day submarine almost down to the last bolt!" He published Wells. He published himself, establishing a tradition respected by every science fiction editor since. His stories were the short stories "The Magnetic Storm", "The Electric Duel" and "The Killing Flash", and the novels *Ralph 124C 41+* and *Baron Munchausen's Scientific Adventures* (which was narrated by one "I.M. Alier"). He published reprints from the Munsey adventure magazines by writers like Murray Leinster. He published reprints from *Science and Invention,* and some reprints of reprints. A. Bertram Chandler even wrote in to complain about that. Eventually, Gernsback published new writers, most frequently David Keller, Harl Vincent, S.P. Meek, Bob Olsen, A. Hyatt Verrill, and Stanton A. Coblentz. The stories were largely about the inventions of the future.

But the most famous new story that Gernsback published was Edward E. Smith's *The Skylark of Space.* "Plots, counterplots, hair-raising and hair-breadth escapes, mixed with love, adventure and good science seem to fairly tumble all over the pages." "By the time you finish reading the final instalment of *The Skylark of Space,* we are certain that you will agree with us that it is one of the most outstanding scientifiction stories of the decade."

Where did Gernsback's dream of prophetic and educational fiction go wrong? When did *science fiction* get turned into unacceptable fantasy?

From April, 1926 until Gernsback lost control of *Amazing* in 1929, he published every bit of scientifiction in existence. He set the rules. He made the definition and illustrated it with stories. He said what science fiction was and he showed what it was.

From June 1929 through December, there were three science fiction magazines. There was *Amazing,* at first nominally edited by Arthur H. Lynch, from November officially edited by T. O'Conor Sloane, who had been editor-in-fact for Gernsback. They continued Gernsback's successful policies. They published Verne, and David Keller, and Harl Vincent, and S.P. Meek, and Bob Olsen, and Stanton Coblentz, and Clare Winger Harris.

Gernsback started two magazines, *Science Wonder Stories* and *Air Wonder Stories,* which in 1930 he combined into *Wonder Stories.* (The slogan of *Air Wonder* was: "The Future of Aviation Springs from the Imagination", and the stories were to be "SOLELY flying stories of the future, strictly along scientific—mechanical—technical lines,

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full of adventure, exploration and achievement.") Gernsback published Wells, and Keller, and Vincent, and Meek, and Coblentz, and A. Hyatt Verril, and Clare Winger Harris. Not to mention Ed Earl Repp.

Still, at that moment in 1929, there was the possibility of science fiction that did not fit Gernsback's definition. There were *two* editorial judgements instead of one. T. O'Conor Sloane was born in 1851, so he was nearly 80. In fact, he continued to edit *Amazing* until 1938. He wore a long white beard. On the one hand, he was the son-in-law of Thomas Edison, so that he had a certain sympathy with Gernsback's love of invention. On the other, he did not believe in the possibility of space travel. He was not a True Believer. He printed stories he could only think were fantasy. In 1930, he published the first six stories of John Campbell, including the novel *The Black Star Passes*. He published *The Universe Wreckers* by Edmond Hamilton. And he published Edward E. Smith's second novel, *Skylark Three*. Were these stories *really* science fiction? Sloane couldn't know. He himself could not tell the difference. If he wanted to know, the only person he might have asked was Gernsback, the keeper of the keys, and I don't believe that he did.

In January, 1930, another competitor appeared, *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, edited by Harry Bates. Where *Amazing* and *Science Wonder Stories* were the brethren of popular science magazines, aspired to good paper when it could be afforded, and were always of a respectable "bedsheet" size—8½ x 11 or 8½ x 11½—*Astounding* came from a line of adventure fiction magazines, was printed on cheap paper, and was published in the standard "pulp" size—7 x 10. It looked racier and less educational and it was.

Harry Bates had different ideas than Gernsback: "*Amazing Stories!* Once I had bought a copy. What awful stuff, I'd found it! Cluttered with trivia! Packed with puerilities. Written by unimaginables!"

He says, "I had thought up about a dozen possible names. Of them all, the one I liked best was *Tomorrow*, but I didn't even show this one to Clayton, because it was too mild and indefinite and sort of highbrow. My second preference was *Science Fiction*, which was generic and like the other had dignity, but I killed this one with arguments that as a phrase hardly anyone had ever seen or heard it (*Amazing* preferring the horrible 'scientifiction') and that as a name it would promise only mild and orthodox stories concerned with *today's* science . . . It was my third preference which I advocated: *Astounding*. As a name it lacked dignity, but no matter: it was gutsy and would compel attention, and it generally resembled *Amazing* and could be counted on to attract the eye of that magazine's readers while pleasantly promising others that the stories would stun them. It was a little better than *Fantastic* and much better than *Astonishing* and *Future* and the remaining ones on my list. I think I remember Clayton's trying it aloud, tasting it. I am not sure that the rest of the name was decided that morning, but I can tell you the reasons for our choice. 'Of Science Fiction' would in time have become redundant. 'Of Super-Science' was perfect. The word Science was in it, also that great promiser of extras: Super. As a phrase, the flavor was a trifle vulgar, but the meaning was right on the beam. Super-Science means *above* and *more than* science. The science fiction of the early writers was indeed above and more than science.

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"(To state it bluntly, the science fiction of the early writers had little relation to the science of the scientists. However, it had as much relation as it has had since, in the main. The extrapolations of most science fiction writers rocket starward from pads much too narrow and rickety. If the writers were solidly grounded in the sciences, *and* if they were aware of the intermeshings of the sciences, *and* if each one had a stiff conscience, there'd be very little science fiction written . . . The naked fact is, almost all of what is called science fiction is fantasy and nothing else but. This has increasingly come to be recognized, but when I began privately saying so, near the beginning, I would get arguments. Do you aging buffs really think there is more science in science fiction nowadays? Do you really think the stories are less impossible? Of course they are better written, many of them, and more thought-provoking, some of them—but science? Hurrah for our honest old *Super*-Science!)"

Bates also said, "Some of you clamored for occasional stories of the kind appearing in *Amazing,* but we knew that large numbers of the other readers would have been repelled by them. You still say that certain of *Amazing's* stories were classics? Okay, I take your word for it . . . . I'll tell you a secret. Eventually I tried to get a couple of hybrids combining the most conspicuous qualities of *Astounding* and *Amazing,* but I failed. It seemed we could not make them mix . . ."

So that was two votes of three against Gernsback. One editor didn't know for certain *what* science fiction was, and the other knew it was fantasy. By 1936, *Astounding* was the only monthly sf magazine. *Amazing* was bi-monthly and Gernsback sold a faltering and bi-monthly *Wonder Stories* to Standard Magazines, a pulp chain, after first compromising by publishing space opera, for which he apologized. In other words, Gernsback's science fiction lasted as a working ideal for exactly as long as there was no alternative to it. When there was an alternative, Gernsback failed.

As Gernsback said, science fiction "was serious and, yes, instructive and educational. *It was not primarily intended to entertain or to amuse.* These stories carried a message, and that is the great difference between technological science fiction and fantasy tales. I repeat: Either you have *science* fiction, with the emphasis on *science,* or you have fantasy. You cannot have both—the two genres bear no relation to each other."

The real science fiction of the Twenties, when Gernsback was running the show, was prophetic fiction about inventions, stories like Gernsback's own *Ralph 124C 41+.* (An editor's own fiction has been a valuable clue to the state of his heart and mind from Gernsback, to Harry Bates with his "Hawk Carse" rousers, to John W. Campbell, to Fred Pohl, Ted White and Mike Moorcock.) Gernsback's science fiction was written by David Keller, Bob Olsen, Clare Winger Harris, and Ed Earl Repp.

The false science fiction of the Thirties, when Gernsback had lost control, was primarily intended to entertain or to amuse. It was published in *Astounding* and it was written by Edward E. Smith, John Campbell, Murray Leinster and Jack Williamson. It was exuberant fantasies of super-science. And it was the more tightly-hauled fantasies of metaphorical science that Campbell had begun to write as Don A. Stuart and would encourage when he became editor of *Astounding,* the sort of stories that Gernsback considered fantasy when they won the Hugo Award.

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In the SFWA Basic Science Fiction Bibliography compiled by me from lists by James Blish, L. Sprague de Camp, Damon Knight, Andre Norton, Joanna Russ, Robert Silverberg, Jack Williamson, and me, and published in the June 15, 1970, *Library Journal,* which can stand as an indication of what we value in science fiction, there are sixty-two novels published since 1926, thirty-two with some magazine publication. None was published by Gernsback. The earliest, Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space,* was published in *Astounding* in 1934. The first nine, all those published before 1948, appeared in *Astounding* or *Unknown: Sinister Barrier, Lest Darkness Fall, Gray Lensman, The Incomplete Enchanter, Slan, Beyond This Horizon, Conjure Wife,* and *The World of Null-A.* How many of these would Gernsback allow to be science fiction and how many fantasy?

The history of science fiction is very short. Generously, one might say that it lasted from April 1926 to December 1929. The Era of Gernsback. But it is as fair to say that science fiction never existed, that it was a dream of Gernsback's that was never realized. Gernsback wanted something narrower than he was forced to publish. If science fiction turned into fantasy in front of his eyes, it was he who had started the change.

He called his magazine *Amazing* instead of *Scientifiction,* and that was a fatal compromise. In his letter contest on "What Science Fiction Means to Me"; his winners honored the spirit of fantasy as much as the spirit of prediction. Gernsback not only published the space opera *The Skylark of Space,* he praised it highly. He also published Edmond Hamilton's novel *Comet Doom,* which Hamilton did not distinguish from the fiction he was writing for *Weird Tales.* He published Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Master Mind of Mars:* "entirely new, packed chockful of adventure and excellent science"; Gernsback's personal copy of which was bound together with his company's publication, *The Secrets of Your Hands, or Palmistry Explained* by W.W. De Kerlor. He published Weinbaum. He published space opera regularly in the Thirties. And, in his last science fiction magazine, *Science Fiction +,* published for seven issues in 1953, he printed Harry Bates' "Death of a Sensitive" and "The Triggered Dimension". Yes, Harry Bates.

Either Gernsback himself could not always tell the difference between science fiction and fantasy, or he printed stories he didn't approve of and lied when he said how much he liked their science, or he had a unique notion of science. Perhaps the kindest thing to be said is that *Science Wonder Stories,* the home of science fiction, was as limited in conception as *Air Wonder Stories,* and as impossible to sustain.

Gernsback won only a single battle. His idea of what the field should be was repudiated. His name for it, science fiction, was adopted. By 1932, *Amazing* was calling itself "The Magazine of Science Fiction" instead of "The Magazine of Scientifiction". By 1938, *Astounding* was *Astounding Science-Fiction.*

The name survived, I would say, because it was concise, comparatively unrestricting, and respectable in sound. If you didn't look too closely, it fit the field, and it sounded pretty good. But the respectability it gave was always spurious, and usually transparent, and depended on things like taking credit for the atomic bomb. I can only believe that it was an attempt to repeat this "success" that tempted John Campbell into Dianetics and dowsing.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 125)

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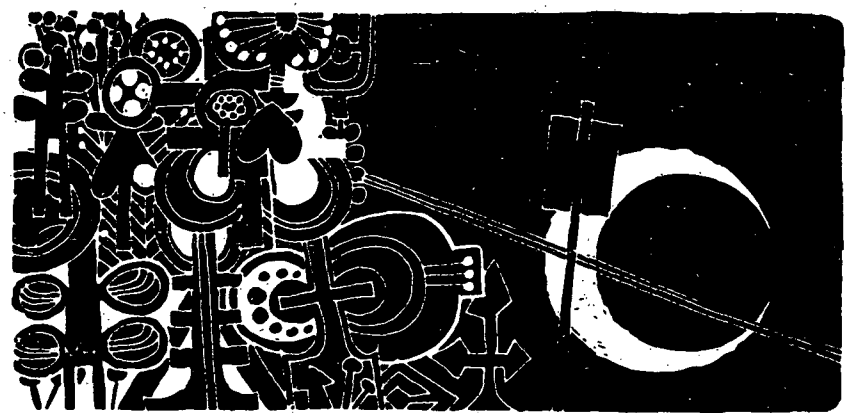

...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, *and addressed to* According To You, *P.O. Box 409, Falls Church, Virginia, 22046.*

Dear Mr. White:

I read your desperate plea in FANTASTIC a week ago; though I don't doubt that you've more than had your fill of suggestions from people who'd like to tell you how to run your magazines, I think I could make some observations and criticisms that might help you.

Mr. White, what, then, is wrong with your magazines?

I have a copy of that Oct. 70 FANTASTIC in front of me.

On its cover is a blatant example of pulp art at its most colorful and at its worst. A new, complete fantasy novel by Dean R. Koontz, "The Crimson Witch," is proclaimed under it.

Do you know what words come to my mind as I look at that cover?

Pulp fiction. Trash. (Supertoad.)

What kind of an audience are you attracting with that sort of cover?

The first problem, as I see it, with your magazines is format. Your formats as they are identify SF-Fantasy as the same kind of stuff that is published in *ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE* or somesuch; it seems bent on attracting the same level of audience. I bought my FANTASTIC from the company of *ZG* and his like; the fact that some of the fiction in the Oct. FANTASTIC is worlds beyond *ZG* and etc. isn't going to mean much when people intelligent enough to understand (well . . . be intrigued by) Malzberg and Bunch pass it up, after passing it off as *ZG* pulp trash.

Suggestion: You've got to change F and A's format so they appear, at least, to be completely and obviously out of the Pulpish-*ZG* tradition. It is a tradition that has outlived its usefulness. Let's make our own tradition . . .

How? Mr. White, you could do a lot worse than to do just this: be absolutely, completely daring with the visual, advertising effects on F and A. Forget the pulp art, never print another blatantly colored inch of it. Forget that hideously

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"square" looking (both in slang and in reality) FANTASTIC across the top of your cover. SF professes to be more creative than almost anything else around; how do covers like the one on the Oct. FANTASTIC bespeak the creative spirit of SF? They don't, that's how.

Let me say this a little bit stronger. I would not be caught dead in a schoolroom, English class, or otherwise around educated people, with that FANTASTIC on my person. I would be embarrassed by it. Because it would give the impression that SF is cheap and sensational. Which it is not. At least some of it isn't. That's the whole thing we're fighting for, isn't it? Toad, supertoad, into Prince, isn't it?

(You can see by now that I've been pretty well saturated by A. Panshin's SF perspective ideas. Thank you for printing them. It is a sad statement on your magazines when I say that Mr. Panshin's perspectives have been the most exciting things I have read there so far; though I've disagreed with him a lot, I have never finished a perspective without being moved and inspired . . . I think the directions he points out are good, and you could, to a certain degree, follow them.)

Advertising (cover and format primarily I guess) which is of inconceivable importance in gaining and holding audiences, is not helping A and F at all. I think that's one of your main problems.

(Please notice, I do not make any concrete suggestions, this isn't exactly the place for them. I could, easily, if I needed to, though.)

Now, let's look into the contents of this pulp magazine with that terribly commercial picture on front of it. Hmm. Malzberg, Bunch, Panshin, Benford (Koontz, Leiber). Let us imagine our standard pulp-*ZG*-audience attractee who has seen your cover and is just looking in . . .

He reads quickly through the short Malzberg tale.

Now, do you know what he does? He throws the magazine down and walks away. And resolves never to pick it up again.

And our "intellectual" prospect? He, as has been explained, never picks up the magazine in the first place. But he'd be delighted, perhaps, with the three short stories in it, if he'd made himself read them . . .

And then there's the novel by Dean Koontz.

Second problem, then: a fatal (or rapidly becoming fatal) conflict in content. Trashy format vs. intellectual-content vs. pulp-trash content. Make up your mind, Mr. White. Are A and F going to be "pulp" or adult? I don't know if you can be both. Either be hot or cold, for if you're lukewarm, I'll spew thee out of my mouth: it's that sort of thing.

And, of course, permit me to put in my vote right now for A and F going all adult. Seriously, it looks to me as if it's the only way to survive. It may not be easy, but it's A and F's (and Sf's?) only chance. Why don't you set a revolutionary editorial policy? Banish *all* melodrama completely from the pages of your magazines. Encourage authors to become creative in other directions. See what happens. It would be a daring experiment. It could be a successful experiment.

My first criticism of your magazines' content is that it doesn't know where it's at . . . "pulp" or literature? Can you be both? (No . . .)

My second is that it lacks scope. Magazines that lack scope lack an audience. What do I mean by scope?

What would A-F be like if they

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reflected the real scope of SF at this moment?

What would A-F be like if they reflected the scope of art in general (which, of course, would include SF) at this moment?

(The answer is, they would at least survive, which they're not doing at the moment, it seems. But let's look at the questions some more.)

Do you want to know exactly what the writings are that I find most exciting in SF these days? The novels of Lafferty, Joanna Russ, Delany, Panshin, Zelazny. All of which have been conspicuous for their absence from AMAZING and FANTASTIC and the SF magazines elsewhere. Other people will have other choices; I think many of them will match mine to a certain degree. Now, who are the authors of the novels in A-F so far?

Let's see. Silverberg. Dick. White. Hoffman. Koontz. Anthony.

Good books, some of them, and good writers (some of them). But nothing spectacular, is there?

The most exciting thing I read in the last AMAZING was a book review; Benford on Joanna Russ's *And Chaos Died*. The most exciting things we read in your SF magazines, it seems, are critical writings on books that have appeared lately elsewhere.

This is very sad. Can it change?

Now, the second question. I think that A-F should have enough scope so that they could review any kind of creative literature, not just F-SF. And so they could publish any kind of creative literature (you've done this to a certain degree; I applaud your action). And so they could review, and discuss, any kind of creative music . . .

You see, there is a certain audience that is interested in SF . . . a larger one interested in literature as a whole . . . and a larger one interested in music . . .

There's our, your, audience. An audience you, for obvious reasons, aren't attracting now. But what would happen if you began encompassing the scope of creative art? Articles, say, on Herman Hesse . . . on the Science Fiction album that the Jefferson Airplane is working on now . . . an interview with Frank Zappa, discussing his contemplated wildly SFish movie, discussing his roots in SF (he has them; Sheckley, and Cordwainer Smith are two influences he has named). What would happen if you plastered Zappa's name across an Avante-Gardish cover with FANTASTIC somehow on it, published an intelligent record review section (or maybe, Rock perspectives to complement Panshin's SF perspectives . . . Rock is worthy of it, and sore in need of it, now), and an intelligent Book Review section in which creative and important "mainstream books" are considered along with SF—

And *then* came across with Malzberg, Bunch, and Benford?

(And then maybe in the same issue, actually publish a novel, or one half of a novel, on the level of an *And Chaos Died*.)

In other words, I have a dream of a magazine, just like you had yours, and maybe the only way I'll see it fulfilled is to do it myself. But you had your dream, and you brought A and F up a step; we all admire you for it, you did the right, the only thing.

But one step wasn't enough. Now you need to keep on rising and bring A and F up one more step. You need to experiment some more, and if you fail, then fail spectacularly. At least, then, it might serve as a stepping stone on which the next experiment, the next magazine, might succeed.

I think my plan your best chance of

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survival at the moment. But even if you reject it, I hope it adds some perspective to your editorial policy as it is, and helps out, a little, at least, that way.

Todd Compton
c/o Val Beck
68 S. 1st E.
Ephrain, Utah, 84627

You paint a rosey picture for the magazine you envision, Todd, and if FANTASTIC was mine alone to gamble, I might try some of your suggestions. But we must face certain economic verities, and the first one is that the publisher risks the money and calls the shots. My scope of endeavor is limited—broad as it may in fact appear. The decision to link that particular cover—on the October issue—with that particular novel was mine. You found them both "pulp"y. Others responded more affirmatively. At least the cover did not promise something the novel did not deliver. My basic approach in editing this magazine has been to allow it to find its own direction—to limit it far less than I do AMAZING. At the same time I am conscious of the fact that FANTASTIC reporesents a nearly unique market and outlet for certain types of material. The magazine has been a home for David Bunch's stories for a decade, now. It has become one also for Barry Malzberg's unusual stories (and in several cases the only home he could find for them—but that is more an indictment of the other magazines published in this country than a measure of our superiority). Under Malzberg's prior editorship, we began a tradition of scholarly criticism with Fritz Leiber's column (which is now appearing on an irregular basis, unfortunately). That tradition continues with Alexei Panshin's column, and will be augmented next issue with the first of a series of pieces by L. Sprague deCamp. But there's a limit to what we can squeeze into this magazine—even in tiny 8-point type. We must draw a line somewhere, and so we do. The magazine you have actually described is the former British magazine, NEW WORLDS. *I will not pretend to a fondness for it—I found it rarely readable, usually pretentious, and of little interest. So, apparently, did its audience, which dropped to only a few thousand. (A new and different version is to be published in this country by Berkley Books, I understand.) The danger, when you move from what is clearly and obviously sf (or fantasy) into the amorphous "mainstream" is that you lose definition. You complain that in attempting to present a broad spectrum of fantasy in these pages we have already done just that. But if we were to broaden our limits even farther—to include music, art, and "mainstream" writings—might we not lose even those who still remain faithful to us? This has been the experience of every "category" magazine which has reached too far beyond its category—and none have survived. However . . . you'll notice our "square" logo has changed, and I think you'll find much of our forthcoming fiction up to your "adult" expectations. —TW*

Dear Ted White:

I hope you can get the *Fantasy Books* column back on a regular schedule . . . It's one of the best review columns on purely fantasy books in the field, and FANTASTIC seems to be missing something with it.

I don't know whether you'd take this as a compliment or not, but I'd say that FANTASTIC is probably the most experimental American sf magazine published. But what's even more wonderful, you don't seem to worship experimentalism for its own sake, like

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some people do—instead, I think you want to see it applied. Gerald F. Conway's story, "Walk of the Midnight Demon", is a good example of that. The form it was written in wasn't meant to confuse, but rather to enhance what otherwise would have been a ordinary supernatural story. Barry Malzberg's story is another experiment (though I didn't think it was a very successful one! His "Between Generations" was much better)—so is Richard Lupoff's satire, and maybe even Brian Aldiss' "Cardiac Arrest". And one more thing: they are also *enjoyable* experiments, which is one quality I think most other experimental stories lack.

I bet you'll get a lot of complaints about "Battered Like A Brass Bippy" being a non-sf or fantasy story—and in a way, you know, they'll be *right*. It is, of course, a satire on another sf story (and a pretty good one, at that)—but I wonder just how many people have read Harlan Ellison's "Shattered Like A Glass Goblin"? Not many, I would suppose—"Goblin" is, after all, a rather insignificant little story. But unless they've read "Goblin", will they really appreciate what Lupoff was getting at . . .? I think that was the author's big blunder: not picking a well-known classic or short story series to satirize . . .

Otherwise, the story was fine; matter-a-fact, maybe even the best yet! Sf satires seem to have been neglected, which is a shame, since there seems so much material just waiting around to be satirized: Isaac Asimov's Susan Calvin Robot stories, for instance. These satires will probably become as much a trademark of FANTASTIC as the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories are!

Alexei Panshin's suggestion that we need a new name to cover the diverse fields/subgenres of science fiction, fantasy, science fantasy, etc., is a good one, but honestly, I don't think "creative fantasy" is a very good over-all term to use. *All* fantasy is creative, so what do you gain by joining the two words together? How can there possibly be such a thing as *un*creative fantasy? We may need a new name for the genre, but I just don't think "creative fantasy" is it. Despite its bad connotations, "speculative fiction" would be a more appropriate label—all science fiction, fantasy, and whatever, "speculates" about something . . . And when such diverse people as Harlan Ellison and J.J. Pierce seem to like the word, well, it looks like you might have total agreement within the field . . . (for once!) People would have to disassociate the word from the "new wave", and all it's connotations, and realize that it would only be an *over-all* term for the whole field—they could call their little sub-genres whatever they liked.

But . . . I don't really think any name change will occur. After all, if you labeled your magazine "speculative fiction" or "creative fantasy", how many people would buy it? How many would even know what you were talking about? It might simply be easier to change the *definition* of sf—and keep the old name. After all, nobody has agreed on what it means anyway!

Cy Chauvin
17829 Peters
Roseville, Michigan 48066

Todd Compton, meet Cy Chauvin! —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I have been enjoying Alexei Panshin's *SF In Dimension*, but in the October FANTASTIC he engages in an irritating sort of academic obfuscation: ". . . only Roger Zelazny among us has attempted a

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note that might be called eloquence, and after four pages he was willing to drop it." Where? When? ". . . a young Zelazny did exercises in the hands of Harlan Ellison and John Collier and others . . ." What stories? Titles, please. I'm not asking for footnotes (though I wouldn't mind seeing them, either), but I wish he would knock off this tendency toward obscurity.

Incidentally, your article in YANDRO a few years ago concerning Mr. Panshin's book on SF which was lacking a publisher aroused my interest and I would like to see it run in FANTASTIC or AMAZING in installments. Of course, then there might be no space for his *new* articles . . .

Hank Davis
Box 154
Loyall, Ky. 40854

Alexei Panshin's original book was written under contract to a specific publisher, but after he delivered it, it sat upon the editor's desk a year, unread! Which says something about the attitudes of some publishers toward science fiction. It was our original idea to serialize the book here, but in the intervening years since it was written portions of it had become less relevent to Panshin's current outlook, and he decided to update and revise it, chapter by chapter for publication in FANTASTIC. However, in the process of "updating and revising" the book it turned into something else entirely—and may, ultimately, become a wholly new book. —TW

Dear Ted,

"The Crimson Witch" is a splendid fantasy, marred only, I think, by the chapter in which Jake and Cheryn escape to earth. The story had built up a certain mood, a mood of power and mysticism, and I'm afraid the excursion to Earth shatters that mood quite effectively.

Barry N. Malzberg has written an intensely powerful two-pager. "As Between Generations" left me wondering—just how much pure, blazing hatred *is* there between the generations? And why? One can read in the papers just how strong the feeling against youth is getting in some areas—in some elections this year a "middle-aged backlash" developed, and candidates supported and compaigned for by college students lost by fantastic margins. The generation gap (hate that term) seems to be splitting wider and wider. Mere chronological age should not be such a barrier to communication. But it is—I don't know when I've seen a truly meaningful dialogue between the two sides—everyone is always real uptight and trying to get the other guy on the defensive.

Moving on to less disturbing matters: I note that right in the same issue that I, in the *Fantasy Fandom* column, expound on the separateness of fantasy and science fiction, and the need for separate awards, Alexei Panshin, in *his* column, says that science fiction is merely a restricted form of fantasy. Now I can agree with that (they're still separate, if one is restricted from the other) but I don't agree with Alexei that this makes science fiction a "toad" and that it needs to shed these restrictions to become a "prince" again. Alexei complains that there is "no living definition" of science fiction that can comfortably contain Ray Bradbury. Well, I define science fiction as fiction which speculates, in a plausible manner, about the future. I don't mention science—I agree with Alexei that science is not crucial. Our genre is not "science fiction" at all—it is speculative fiction. Hugo Gernsback may have thought it was science fiction, back in 1926, but Hugo

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did not create the field, he was simply the first to base a publication on it. Of course the genre is restricted—to be a genre it has to be. If some of Bradbury's work does not fit in, then maybe it is something else, and possibly something great, but that doesn't make the field a "toad."

I don't think that sf is nearly as restricted as Alexei makes it out to be. And even if it were, this would not stop those writers who were ready to go beyond. If science fiction is a toad, it is because the writers are content with it that way—not because of any inherent restrictions in the genre.

Mike Juergens
257 Florence St.
Hammond, Indiana, 46324

I don't think the barrier between the generations is one of chronological age, but rather a gap created by communications breakdowns between parents and their offspring. The former child resents his parents for still regarding him as a child, while the parents cannot accept a challenge to their authority by he who was once so wholly dependant upon them. Barry's story addressed itself quite directly to this aspect—the father and the son, each driven to hatred for the other. As most children grow into adulthood both they and their parents find accommodation to their new roles with each other, however—and it would be pleasant to hear in the news about these people for a change. After all, most of us don't feel comfortable nursing a continuing hatred—even in the face of the attempts of certain national leaders to foster such hatreds. —TW

Dear Ted,

I'm continually amazed by the excellence of Alexei Panshin's critical columns on the science fiction field. I've said it before, but I repeat, this column is probably the best single addition you've made to either of the two magazines in your period as editor. His work is presently unique, in both the professional and fan ranks, and I sincerely hope some enterprising publisher collects these columns into a finished work, for he will then have the best single critical volume published so far on the field of fantasy and science fiction.

This particular column, centering on the tradition of melodrama and the Gernsbackian scientific background, is of special interest when placed against the Fantasy Fandom column of this very issue, the column calling for a new award purely for fantasy. Alexei says it so well, and I repeat it for Mr. Juergens: "We have reached the point where we are willing to talk of 'speculative fiction' instead of 'science fiction,' but even today we waste our time trying to reconcile creative fantasy and science." With the current experimentation and the interest in so-called speculative fiction, the always-fine line between fantasy and science fiction becomes virtually non-existant. We have never been able to arrive at a really suitable dividing line between the two, and now a search for such a line becomes impossible, not to mention pointless. Even in the past, there have been many who insisted that the two are essentially part of the same form, and today, this is even more obvious. The first problem the idea of a fantasy award presents is then simple—how do we decide what is science fiction, what is fantasy. I see no reasonable answer to this question.

But even considering this assumes such an award is necessary, and to conclude this, we'd have to see that fantasy material has had no opportunity at the current Hugo and Nebula awards, ostensibly purely science fiction awards.

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But when we look at those awards, we see that in fact this has not been the case. Novels like *Sword of Aldones,* and *Day of the Minotaur,* pretty definitely fantasy (if there is indeed a real difference) have been nominated for the Hugo; *Black Easter* was a finalist in the 1969 Nebula balloting. Short fiction nominees have included Leiber's "Scylla's Daughter," Swann's "Where is the Bird of Fire," Leiber's "The Unholy Grail," Burrough's "Savage Pellucidar," Leiber's "Stardock," and many other fantasy or fantasy-based stories. Bloch's "The Hell-Bound Train" and Leiber's "Gonna Roll the Bones" have actually won Hugos, and the latter also took a Nebula. Leiber's winner this year, "Ship of Shadows," is certainly on the borderline between the two related fields. In addition, two of the five nominees for the best all-time series in the 1966 voting were out and out fantasy: the Barsoom series and *Lot R.* In short, there has been no paucity of fantasy material on the Hugo and Nebula lists; the awards have recognized outstanding work, no matter what the classification.

Before I leave this subject—as an example of the need for a fantasy award, Juergens says, "I think it's ridiculous for *Pavane* and *Stand on Zanzibar* to be competing for the same award." I don't wish to argue over definitions, but I and every review I've seen definitely consider *Pavane* science fiction, of the alternate universe or alternate Earth variety. So while it may in fact be ludicrous for two such novels to be competing for the same award, even were a fantasy award available, I think they still would be competing so.

One final note. We almost always have difficulty in finding worthy nominees in at least one of the regular fiction categories as the regular Hugo rules now stand. Were a fantasy award instituted, I sincerely doubt if there would be enough really good fantasy available to provide a sufficient number of nominees to make the voting worth while.

Fantasy is the kind of fiction that runs in FANTASTIC. Exactly the point I was making before. The borderline is so fine, a separate award would be ridiculous.

David Halterman on marijuana: David makes the comment that "My personal opinion is that a hallucination is Nature's way of saying 'NO.' (As is intoxication.) Under normal conditions, in a healthy person, marijuana does not cause anything resembling hallucinations; there are some substances that do, but pot is not one of these substances. A minor point, perhaps, but I think clarification is important. Incidentally, I do agree with the opinions the two of you share on the current legal situation—since pot is presently illegal, don't get non-users into delicate situations. Make it easier on everyone.

A few comments on the artistic changes, especially the cover. I generally do not like Morrow's work, and I think you must admit that this particular piece is not one of his best. But granting this, I rather like the general cover layout. Not as good as the beautiful Jones cover last issue, but perhaps with the new and good-looking large logo, you can experiment with totally different layouts each issue without losing reader identification. A touch I don't like, however, is the hand-lettering. While it is undeniably good-looking, I don't feel it is as effective as a more standard title. It just looks amateur, appearing on the cover: on the opening page of the story itself this would be interesting, but here it looks bad. It's also somewhat difficult to read, and you certainly don't want to have a problem reading the cover story!

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Jerry Lapidus
54 Clearview Drive
Pittsford, N.Y., 14534

Opinion on our October cover was sharply divided. Some of you hated it, some loved it. Those who disliked it were also divided: some didn't care for Gray's painting, while others were disappointed in the treatment (hand-lettering, etc.). About all this tells us is You can't please everybody. *(But we go on trying . . . and how do you like Gray's cover* this *issue?) —TW*

Dear Mr. White,

I just bought your December issue of FANTASTIC, and in reading your editorial the comments about the art work within and without your magazines interested me. I quite agree with you about Mike Hinge's work. That cover on the November AMAZING is really good, and it is different too. As for Mike Kaluta, his cover painting on the present issue of FANTASTIC is great. I have always loved Jeff Jones' work, and his cover on the recent Ace edition of Fritz Leiber's *Swords Against Death* is the best I have seen from him yet. Oh, yes, do you have any other work by Gray Morrow on hand? My favorite artist (and I'm sure I am not alone in this) is Frank Frazetta. Would you happen to have anything by him, or if not could you possibly get hold of some? And what about Roy Krenkel? From the little that I hear of him, one would think he is dead. (Forgive my ignorance, but *is* he dead? I have not been reading sf for a very long time, only three years.)

As for all this discussion as to the difference between sf and fantasy. I think a lot of this argument is unnecessary. I agree that there is a difference, and I also agree that there should be a separate award for fantasy at the Convention (as was suggested by an article a few issues back). But most fans like both sf and fantasy—at least I do. I always thought that fantasy was just another area of science fiction. We are continually saying that sf is a unique form of literature in that it can include anything you can think of. If this is true then fantasy would be just another one of those things that comes under the field of science fiction. So you might say that although fantasy and science fiction are different, they are the same thing?

Bill Cole
3024 66th Street
Lubbock, Texas 79413

You raise an interesting point—and perhaps one with which Alexei Panshin would agree—but it's a more commonly held attitude in this field that science fiction is a specialized branch of fantasy than vice-versa.

It's a running joke between Roy Krenkel and myself that much as he wants to do covers for us, he never seems to get around to it. He doesn't want to illustrate a specific story, but when I suggest, "Just paint whatever you really want to paint," he replies, woefully, "That's just it; I can't seem to figure out what I really want to do." The last time I saw him—a couple of weeks ago—I told him a reader had asked if he was dead. "It's time you did that cover, Roy," was about the way I put it to him. His reply was to chuckle ruefully. Then the topic of conversation turned to the proper preparation of good Texas chili.

I should also take this space to publicly apologize to both Mike Kaluta and Mike Hinge for the way their superb covers came out. In neither case was I satisfied. The engraver did not follow instructions on the positioning of type (and Hinge's name was cropped right off his painting, although visable on the original

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mechanical), and color values were severely distorted. Since these were both debut covers for each artist, I feel doubly disappointed for them. (We changed engravers immediately following those issues, and Steve Harper's cover—another debut—last issue, came out very well, I thought.)

That concludes the letters for this issue. Due to my move to Virginia, most of the letters on the December issue (still on sale as I write this) have been delayed, and will appear next issue.

—Ted White

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 84)

about that cute little animal just like Ranger Chuck and I were. That's about all the time we have today, little friends and neighbors, so, if you want to see us again tomorrow, get down on your knees in front of your television sets and pray! Pray to Cowboy Tom and to Ranger Chuck. Let your mommy and daddy hear you, let us hear you, pray like you mean it, pray so hard you cry, pray for your teacher in school and the priest in church, pray honestly and pray truly, and we will love you and keep you happy as long as you live.

Copies of today's program may be obtained in care of this station. Please stay tuned for the "Mr. Science and Mr. Faith Program", for ages seven to ten, which follows immediately . . .

—Geo. Alec Effinger

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 115)

Today we no longer need false respectability. The books and stories in the SFWA Bibliography and in the *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* volume are sufficient ground for self-respect. Science and prophecy have nothing to do with it. Our self-respect is based on the fact that the field is an art form, a way of talking about ourselves and our feelings, and that as much as has been accomplished in it, the best is yet to be done.

Even a cursory glance shows that the term "science fiction" no longer can pretend to fit the field. Gernsback was right in 1963. We misuse his word. We are fantasy-writing frauds. We should acknowledge the fact.

As Sam Moskowitz has said, "The real 'Father of Science Fiction' is Hugo Gernsback and no one can take the title away from him." Science fiction was his dream. We should bury it decently with him.

In my last column, I described a cover story contest that Gernsback held in *Science Wonder Stories*. The cover was on the November 1929 issue and showed flying saucers carrying off the Woolworth Building and the Eiffel Tower. The picture had several anomalies. The story was to be between 1400 and 1500 words in length. I promised I would discover the winner and report.

Third Prize was won by John Pierce. No, no, not the Eschatological Romantic—the one who is now head of the Bell Telephone Labs. First Prize was won by Charles R. Tanner, who had several reviews in *Amazing* about two years ago. His story was called "The Color of Space". His explanation was that it was all a trick and that it was the Russians.

Which just shows you: Gernsback's science fiction was prophetic.

—Alexei Panshin

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continued from page 5

chemicals in our food which preserve them longer (but in so doing make them less digestable) or "fortify" them, or "extend" them. Our food is, today, far less nutritional than it was fifty years ago. Having a baby makes a parent look at other babies. *Nearly all the ones I've seen exhibit vitamin deficiencies.* The most obvious is vitamin D deficiency: eyes set too close, and a bulging forehead, due to improper skull development. Why? Their synthesized "formulas" are nutritionally inadequate and most likely their mothers had nutritionally inadequate diets during their pregnancies. (The standard-formula multiple vitamins most doctors prescribe for pregnant women are almost criminally dangerous; not only are they unbalanced—which in itself is a gross inadequacy—but they contain some minerals in vitamin-robbing forms, such as iron sulphate.)

Many of these infant deficiencies can be remedied when a baby goes off its formula of course (and naturally will be avoided if the mother breast-feeds)—*if* adequate food is available. But how likely is that? The best milk one can purchase in a store has been skimmed to a minimum butterfat content, and children's breakfast cereals have recently been exposed as almost all nutritionally worthless. As the child grows older, the temptations of nutritionally worthless confections that curb the appetite will be everywhere—and most of all in commercial advertising on the television programs geared for children.

Take a step beyond that. We've become consumers of "convenience foods"—from hot dogs and hamburgers to tv dinners, prepackaged "mixes," and a vast variety of "instant" this, that, and everything else. Those prepackaged meats (as in hot dogs) which aren't mostly fats are now "watered" with actual water, which is injected into the tissues for a plumper, juicier appearance—and additional weight. Most of the frozen packaged meals are heavy on nutritionally valueless fillers—if not rodent excrement, which *Consumer's Reports* found in the meats of the major packager of such meals—and as prices have gone up have grown smaller in their portions. Almost all the "instant" mixes, from flour to mashed potatoes, have removed nutrients in the processing and substituted chemicals of dubious value (some of which are now under re-evaluation for possible danger in side-effects).

The average American is now consuming "food" rich in carbohydrates and starches, low on protein, and deficient in vitamins. And popping a handy multiple-vitamin pill into his mouth is no cure at all.

Ours is the first generation in this country to subsist on such a diet. What is it doing to us? What long-term effects will we observe—if not in ourselves, then in our children?

It's hard, then, to conjure up a rosey picture for the future my daughter stands to inherit. Should none of the major disasters occur, she may find herself undone by a host of minor ones.

And yet, and yet . . .

If man can persist, and she can survive, perhaps she too will find the unrush of "progress" as exciting as ever. Today I read about the creation of artificial blood, which, if nothing else, may allow the indefinite preservation of functioning organs outside the body, making transplant banks more of a viable reality. That's pretty mind-blowing, right there. (But, one's inner voice asks, what are the possible side-effects? Will this too be a boon that boomerangs?)

After World War II, science fiction

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endured a sudden spate of Atomic Doom stories. These stories forecasted everything from a nuclear war that wiped all life from the planet to a return to stone-aged barbarism for the survivers (who usually forebad the re-invention of the wheel)

We survived that. We survived not only some rather horrible stories, but the wave of pessimism that launched them. And as the cold war of the fifties grew cooler and we realized that we were, at apparent worst, in for a series of "contained conflicts" like Korea and Vietnam, thoughts of Atomic Doom receded from our minds.

Recently, it seems to me, a new wave of pessimism has come upon us—but with this difference: instead of postulating Doom as the climax of the story, we are now visualizing it as the beginning. Doom—something, whether a natural or a man-made disaster—wipes the slate clean. The heroic survivers are presented with an opportunity to Build Anew, this time following a wiser course. I know, because I've written these stories myself. For a man who finds it impossible to believe that we'll simply build a utopic future on the foundations of our present society, it's the easiest solution. Want a solution to the population explosion? Pollution? Growing cultural insanity? Kill 'em off!

It's very appealing—in fiction.

But in reality, we each know quite well that *we* won't survive to begin the Great Adventure. And what's more, that Great Adventure mightn't really be so swell if we had to really *live* it. It would mean hard work on a level few of us have ever known. *We're* not the survivor types. We're the parasites of technology.

A friend of mine told a young fan that he saw this end coming in five years. Five years! 1975! He was a little under the weather, he says, and not really serious, but he made a good case for the notion. "You know what that fellow did? He went and changed his major, and now he's studying how to grow his own food and survive on his own. I mean, he took me *seriously*."

It's not a bad idea.

And so I wander my yard, looking for mushrooms, my wife carrying our daughter with her while she wanders beside me, and next door my grandmother digs up from her attic two quilts for a crib made by *her* grandmother, and when my mind wanders too it follows the chain of succession, *age to youth, youth to age.* A woman who has seen so much, done so much, and will see and do yet more . . . and her great-granddaughter, who still has everything yet to see and do, living in two houses side by side. The span: an almost classic piece of wonderment for the senses.

Where have we come from, and where are we going?

Change of subject:

My move to these more southern quarters will not, for the most part, affect the magazines. A certain amount of difficulty accompanies any transition, and mainly this has meant that mail to my Brooklyn Post Office box, although it reaches me eventually, is delayed. Please use the new address at the head of the letter column in writing to the magazine about editorial matters, if you wish the fastest response.

The cover on this issue is the last I shall be designing for AMAZING or FANTASTIC; beginning with next months's AMAZING, the covers will be designed by our new Art Director, Mike Hinge. Mike has worked professionally as an art director for many years, and I think

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he'll bring a new level of professionalism and quality to our magazines.

Also in our next issue will be the first of a series of articles (scheduled to appear irregularly) by L. Sprague deCamp. His topic: the great fantasy writers of the past. Ultimately these articles will be collected into book form; in the meantime, you'll have the opportunity to read them here first.

And, of course, Poul Anderson's new novel, "The Byworlder." It looks like an outstanding issue, and I'm looking forward to it myself.

—Ted White

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79)

This was what they had not known at Cleftor Heights: that Tuprid and Caschalanva, Quorril and Lry, and moreover Wolpec and Yorbeth and Farchgrind and Fegrim and Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, and all the countless rest of those elementals, were the fellow-natures of the One. It remained true: throughout the cosmos, only one person had many names and a single nature.

Until now, when the last remaining nature spoke with the traveller, sounding weary.

"My age is past, my friend—past like that unnatural night which will nevermore be seen in Cleftor's vales! Eternity at last has found its end, because the powers of chaos have been tamed. And with what little fetters, what is more! The wish of a child to help her mother; the distaste of apprentices for their master; the annoyance of a peddler-man; and the love of a sister for her brother!"

"Then my time is past too," the traveller said, ignoring her recital of his tricks to triumph—which was fair, because all he had was in her gift. "And . . . And I'm not at all sorry. I was almost coming to miss the enemies I'd had in other ages. You could have undermined me by that weakness, could you not?"

"I could." The answer was predictable. She *could*—everything. Now, however, it was a question not of "could" but "would", and the time for willing chaos had gone by.

More silence intervened, and then the traveller stretched and yawned.

"I long for rest," he said. "But—one more thing. Who is to come after us?"

"Let him decide," the pale girl said, and took him by the hand which lacked the staff. Turning, they went together into absence.

—John Brunner

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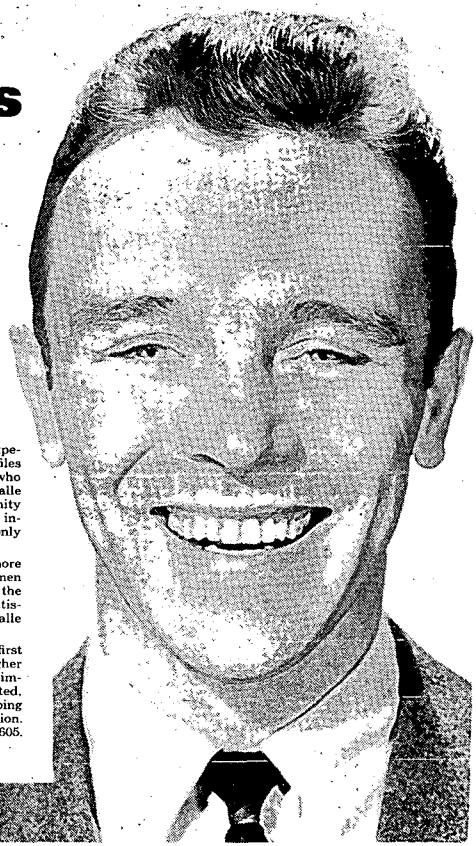

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